Methods of Organizing Independent Work in German Language Classes

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to investigate and experimentally evaluate methods for organizing independent work in German language lessons within secondary educational institutions. The following methods were employed to address the tasks: structural, systemic, theoretical (including analysis, synthesis, systematization, comparison, and classification of scientific and psychological sources of information). The theoretical material and conclusions presented in this study can serve as a foundation for master's theses and diploma projects. The proposed methods for organizing students' independent work in German language lessons can be applied in the educational process, particularly during lectures and practical classes. We conclude that the selection of an educational trajectory during the period of study at school or university is a collaborative process between the teacher and the student, aimed at developing the student's independent learning skills, setting appropriate educational goals and tasks, choosing methods, forms, means, and content of learning, as well as fostering reflection, self-assessment of personal achievements, and the development of initiative and responsibility in decision-making and problem-solving. The prospects for further research in this area lie in exploring methods for motivating students at the initial stage of forming educational goals and objectives, as well as identifying approaches for self-reflection to enhance outcomes.

Keywords: independent work, teaching methods, motivation, innovative teaching methods, educational activities

Методи організації самостійної роботи на заняттях німецької мови

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Анотація

Мета статті – вивчити і експериментально перевірити методи організації самостійної роботи на заняттях німецької мови у закладах середньої освіти. Для вирішення поставлених завдань були використані наступні методи: структурний, системний, теоретичний (аналіз, синтез, систематизація, зіставлення, класифікація науково-психологічних джерел інформації). Теоретичний матеріал та висновки можуть стати основою у роботі над магістерськими та дипломними проектами. Запропоновані методи організації самостійної роботи учнів на уроках німецької мови можуть бути використані у навчальному процесі, зокрема під час проведення лекційних та практичних занять. Висновуємо, що вибір освітньої траєкторії в період навчання в школі чи вузі – це спільні дії педагога і студента, спрямовані на розвиток учнем або студентом умінь самостійної навчальної діяльності, постановку адекватних освітніх цілей і відповідних завдань, вибір методів, форм, засобів і змісту навчання, рефлексію, самооцінку особистісних досягнень, ініціативу і відповідальність за прийняття рішень і вирішення поставлених завдань. Перспективи розвитку даної теми вбачаємо у необхідності дослідження методів мотивації учнів на початковому етапі формування навчальних цілей і завдань, а також пошуку методів саморефлексії для подальшого покращення результатів.

Ключові слова: самостійна робота, методика викладання, мотивація, інноваційні методи навчання, освітня діяльність

Statement of the problem. The rapid dynamic development of modern society in social, economic, and technological spheres has resulted in an increasing demand for new information necessary for a full and productive life, as well as for professional activity. The process of informatisation has significantly impacted the system of general secondary, specialized, and higher vocational education. The societal demand for the training of specialists capable of adapting to new trends in a mobile and flexible manner, innovating products, and rapidly implementing them into production has become a priority. In the current environment, the education received in educational institutions needs to be updated every two to three years, and professionals must undergo continuous upgrading and retraining.

Simultaneously, the development of independent learning skills and the ability to design personalized educational trajectories during the course of study at school or university is of particular significance (Kuzmenko, 2016). These skills will enable students to independently acquire the latest knowledge as needed and to develop new competencies for professional activities throughout their careers. Despite a solid theoretical foundation and existing experimental studies on methods for organizing independent work in foreign language lessons, several issues remain unresolved. Specifically, discrepancies persist in the scientific literature regarding the interpretation of the concepts of 'social work' and 'social activity.' Additionally, challenges exist in organizing individual learning as a means of fostering personal independence and in identifying effective methods for enhancing students' learning and cognitive engagement.

The urgency of these issues and the pressing need to explore ways for teachers to plan individual learning trajectories for students during foreign language instruction led to the selection of the research topic:

"Methods of Organizing Independent Work in German Language Classes."

The Analysis of Sources and Recent Research. The problem of organizing students' independent work and fostering cognitive activity has been examined by several prominent psychologists, including I. Bretsko, L. Vygotsky, V. Davydov, as well as notable foreign scholars such as G. Kershensteiner, M. Montessori, and S. Frenet, among others. The theoretical and methodological foundation of this study is based on the works of theorists I. Volobuieva, M. Verbytska, V. Lozova, M. Terletska, and others.

The Purpose of the article is to investigate and experimentally evaluate methods for organizing independent work in German language lessons within secondary educational institutions.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set:
– To define the essence of the concept of independent work as a didactic category;
– To explore the relationship between the organization of individual learning and the development of personal independence;
– To develop and experimentally test forms for organizing students' independent work in German language lessons.

The study was conducted at the Humanitarian Gymnasium No. 1 in Vinnytsia, involving 31 9th-grade students.

The following methods were employed to address the tasks:
– Structural;
– Systemic;
– Theoretical (including analysis, synthesis, systematization, comparison, and classification of scientific and psychological sources of information).

The theoretical material and conclusions presented in this study can serve as a foundation for master's theses and diploma projects. The proposed methods for organizing students' independent work in German language lessons can be applied in the educational process, particularly during lectures and practical classes.

The Results of the Research. In scholarly works, educators often define independent work as a specific form of cognitive activity that involves students working without direct intervention from the teacher. In the context of the rapid advancement of information technology, the key criteria for evaluating the professional qualities of a graduate are not only the knowledge acquired but also the ability to make independent decisions, efficiency, and creativity.

The primary motivation for students' independent work – namely, the need for new knowledge – drives the activation of previously acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities. It encourages independent planning of learning objectives and the means to achieve them, as well as the accumulation of effort to reach the desired goal.

A contradiction arises when a student, despite possessing sufficient knowledge and skills, is unwilling to demonstrate independence in completing certain tasks. One of the primary reasons for this reluctance is often a lack of motivation.

It is important to emphasize that the development of strong-willed qualities and sustained motivation plays a pivotal role in fostering personal independence. The quality of this independence is determined by the individual's ability to set clear goals and achieve them autonomously.

Independent learning requires continuous student initiative, self-control, self-confidence, self-reflection, and student responsibility in learning (Abidin, 2023; Setyaningsih et al., 2023). What sets it apart from unstructured cognitive activity is its goal-oriented and systematic nature. Fostering a desire for continuous improvement of knowledge and skills is one of the central objectives in organizing individual learning for students. The ability to think independently helps students formulate problem-solving strategies, take the initiative to face challenges, increase competence, and respect themselves when expressing opinions (Triwiratman et al., 2023).

The general tendency is that the organization of independent work helps students develop the ability to consciously regulate their learning activities, adapt the methods they use based on individual needs, and facilitate the smooth transition between different types of activities, including when working with Internet resources.

Independent work should not be seen solely as the absence of control or assistance from the teacher. Instead, it primarily involves originality, the capacity to make non-standard decisions, the ability to set specific goals, and the skill to identify ways to achieve them.

Thus, we can draw the important conclusion that fostering independence in educational activities ultimately involves cultivating in students a continuous desire to improve their knowledge, along

with the ability to independently pursue and organize their learning.

Independence in a student's educational activity is also characterized by its occurrence during the intensive formation of the individual's personality, the development of self-awareness, and the establishment of life goals and vocational aspirations. Therefore, independent educational activity is inherently linked to self-education, the selection of moral principles, and character development. In this sense, fostering independence in educational activities constitutes a systematic pedagogical process.

The relationship between cognition in the learning process and cognition in the context of educational independence can be quite complex, with the boundaries between them often being fluid. Independent educational activity is primarily a form of cognition. The emphasis on its goal-oriented and systematic nature distinguishes it from spontaneous, unstructured cognitive activity.

According to Terletska (2014), the learning process should not only provide students with knowledge, skills, and abilities, and influence their consciousness and behavior, but also foster cognitive activity, which is, in turn, the driving force behind the mental development of the individual. This is why it is essential to create learning situations that stimulate the development of creativity in students. The tasks assigned should be achievable, yet challenging enough to provoke active mental engagement. Successful knowledge acquisition can be seen as the effective organization of students' cognitive activity, where the presented educational material encourages both active mental and practical actions.

By creating an independent educational space around the student and fostering their personal self-activity and independence, we also develop cognitive competence, which holds the potential for successful socialization in the future. The student becomes engaged in independent learning activities, which provide a sense of self-efficacy, regardless of academic performance.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation was already strongly linked to autonomous learning methods (Kelber-Bretz, 2023). However, the pandemic has highlighted numerous critical challenges associated with the use of digital media. It is important to emphasize that the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) has a beneficial effect on students' educational and cognitive processes. Moreover, electronic resources such as Learningapps, Study Stack, MindMeister, Google Meet, and Ideaboardz have been positively evaluated by students (Balakirieva & Bondarenko, 2021).

As part of the experimental phase of our study, we conducted an activity with 9th-grade students at the Humanitarian Gymnasium No. 1 in Vinnytsia, based on the International Programme 'Learning to Teach German' (DLL – Deutsch Lehren Lernen). This program, offered by the Goethe-Institut in Ukraine, is designed for teachers of German around the world.

The experiment was carried out in several phases:
1. Preliminary Preparation: This phase involved reviewing theoretical material, setting specific goals and objectives, and formulating hypotheses and indicators to guide the analysis of students' activities.
2. Discussion with a High School Teacher: A conversation was held with a high school teacher to understand their approach to teaching and the main methods they use in foreign language instruction.
3. Initial Meeting with the Participants: The first interaction with the students was conducted to assess the overall knowledge level of the class.
4. Lesson Preparation: Using the gathered information and personal documentation, the lesson was planned and prepared.
5. Conducting the Experiment: The experiment was implemented with 9th-grade students.
6. Analysis of the Results: The results of the experiment were analyzed based on personal observations, as well as questionnaires completed by the students and teachers who attended the lesson.

The overall goal of the experiment was to analyze students' responses to completing tasks autonomously.

A number of hypotheses were proposed to compare the general expectations of the experiment with the actual course of events. These included:
1. Students are more motivated and willing to work when performing tasks autonomously;
2. They assist one another and correct mistakes during partner and group activities;
3. They speak more freely and are less afraid to make mistakes, as the teacher does not impose strict control over their work.

The opportunity to speak with a high school teacher about the specifics of working in a foreign language class was provided. Since the Deutsch

Lehren Lernen methodology was not used by the teacher, it became clear that the proposed methods and tasks would be new and unfamiliar to the students. After this conversation, it was realized that the tasks would need to be presented clearly and understandably, and the chosen form of work would need to be explained to the students in advance.

The decision to attend one of the German lessons with the class to be worked with directly contributed significantly to the overall planning of the upcoming lesson. The pace of their learning was assessed, the average level of knowledge was determined, the teaching materials were familiarized with, and their behavior in a familiar setting was observed.

The next phase involved preparing for the lesson using the information and documentation that had been received. Efforts were made to design tasks and work formats that would provide all students with the opportunity to express their opinions in German and work independently. Upon observing the lesson at school, it became evident that the students were clearly divided into active and passive groups. Therefore, the goal was to stimulate interest and motivation to complete the tasks and engage as many students as possible in productive cooperation. Without a genuine desire and a clear understanding of the purpose behind learning specific material, students would be unlikely to take the initiative in setting goals, finding solutions, and, most importantly, in analyzing and improving their results.

During the lesson, the goal was clearly stated, and specific tasks were assigned, with no alternatives provided. After dividing the students into several groups and distributing markers and separate sheets of paper, the first task was announced. The students were instructed to discuss several questions related to the topic, briefly summarize the main ideas on a poster, and share their thoughts with the rest of the class.

At the initial stage, the students demonstrated interest in working in groups, though they spoke little German. Given that the grouping was random, the level of knowledge varied significantly across the groups. Unconsciously, the students immediately divided roles: each group had a leader who controlled the process, kept track of time, and engaged their classmates in active work. Some students were responsible solely for the design of the posters, while others dictated what they considered to be the correct answers. As anticipated, some students behaved passively. I refrained from interfering with their work and simply observed the process. In general, the

students did not require my assistance and completed the task as they deemed appropriate. However, the joint discussion no longer seemed as engaging or novel to them, and the number of active participants slightly decreased at this stage.

The next task involved conducting a back dictation. This method not only serves as an effective way to develop students' independence, but also provides an opportunity for the teacher to present information through visual, auditory, and digital channels of perception. In pairs, the students were required not only to read the proposed text, but also to comprehend its topic, identify the logical sequence, and pronounce the words as clearly as possible while dictating them to their partner.

It was evident that this was the first time the students had encountered back dictation. After explaining the purpose and method of the task, they had additional questions and initially performed the task slowly and hesitantly. It was only later that they became more focused on the content of the text and ceased to be distracted by other factors.

By this stage of the lesson, it became clear that students worked more actively in groups. I was surprised when they requested to complete the task with a friend or neighbor, rather than a randomly assigned classmate. Given that the goal was to complete the exercise with high quality, I had to refuse their request, as communication with a close friend could have been prioritized over the task at hand. The students did not object for long, but it was apparent that back dictation was an unfamiliar and unusual activity for them.

Another opportunity for students to work autonomously was through independent work on the text. It is crucial for the teacher to clearly articulate the task in order to stimulate motivation toward achieving a specific goal. Once the students understood the purpose of the task, they worked diligently. As most of the tasks in the lesson were completed without my direct supervision, the students increasingly required less assistance.

The final, yet equally important task, was for the students to conduct interviews. Provided with a list of questions, they were asked to interview several classmates and record their responses on the provided sheets of paper. Since I no longer imposed restrictions on their choice of partners, they opted to interview those with whom they were more familiar or their neighbors. Despite this, their cooperation can be

considered fruitful, as they were seldom distracted and remained focused on the topic at hand.

With each new task, an increasing number of students attempted to speak German. They realized that corrections were made only when necessary – when the meaning of a sentence was unclear due to an error. If minor mistakes did not hinder comprehension, students were given the opportunity to self-correct, or we simply ignored them. The primary objective was to foster autonomous work without strict teacher supervision and to encourage independent analysis of their results. Constant correction and my interventions could have hindered their ability to express themselves confidently and potentially caused apprehension about speaking a foreign language.

At the end of the lesson, the students were asked to complete questionnaires, which enabled them to evaluate their own performance and share their impressions of the experiment and the new social forms of work.

However, the students did not take the analysis of their own results seriously. They understood that the marks they assigned themselves would not be recorded in the gradebook, and that the teacher always has the final say in this regard. This highlights a broader issue: in the learning process, it is crucial not only to develop the ability to work autonomously but also to learn how to independently analyze one's work, set new goals, and find ways to achieve them.

Since today's students, unfortunately, do not have the opportunity to speak German frequently in class, a language barrier exists, which is not only evident from my observations but also supported by statistical data derived from the completed questionnaires. Out of 31 students, 14 reported being afraid of making mistakes. As a result, they would mentally rehearse their sentences before attempting to speak, and when trying to express themselves in German, they spoke slowly and with pauses. Even during pair work, when I provided students with the opportunity to work autonomously and refrained from correcting their answers, they struggled to fully engage and conduct the dialogue exclusively in the foreign language. The results were telling: only 15 out of 31 students responded affirmatively to the question, "Did you speak exclusively in German during your pair work?"

Another interesting aspect for analyzing the results of our experiment concerns the students' interaction during pair and group work. As mentioned earlier, I did not control their task performance but only assisted with questions and checked their completed work. According to the statistics, only 10 out of 31 students corrected their classmates' mistakes during the independent discussion of the questions. The remaining students either did not notice the errors, as they were focused solely on the quality of their own work, or did not feel it was appropriate to point out mistakes, fearing it might disrupt the overall activity.

The results from the teacher's observations, reflected in the completed questionnaires, align with these findings. It was evident when students answered confidently, worked with interest, and remained actively engaged, as opposed to when they initially felt uncertain or skeptical about the new method of working.

Upon analyzing the classroom atmosphere, it became apparent that initially, the students were passive, often distracted by unrelated matters, and it was challenging to regain their focus. Additionally, the desks were rearranged from their usual setup and combined to facilitate group work, which further hindered their ability to concentrate on the lesson. The change in the furniture arrangement contributed to the initial difficulty in focusing.

However, once the students were grouped and began working on the first task, the noise level in the classroom significantly decreased, and everyone became more engaged in the collaborative work. By the end of the lesson, all participants showed a clear interest in the topic and the proposed exercises.

Although the students had questions about the peculiarities of the social learning formats, as it was their first time experiencing them, they did not find it difficult to work autonomously without my direct instructions and guidance. When they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary, they consulted the dictionary independently, and if they identified any ambiguities in the text, they initiated discussions with their peers. Their independent work proved to be fruitful and beneficial, and the absence of my corrections allowed them to engage more freely in German, without the fear of making grammatical mistakes. On occasion, they even attempted to correct their own errors and those of their classmates, which further demonstrated their active interest in the learning process.

Having had the opportunity to observe their learning during a regular German lesson and to teach my own lesson using the methods from the new program, I noticed a distinct difference in their behavior and approach to the material. Although the

same topic was covered, the alternative teaching approach led to increased student engagement, a reduction in errors, and a greater willingness to ask additional questions.

By comparing my initial hypotheses with the results obtained, I was once again convinced that autonomous learning plays a positive role in the acquisition of foreign language material.

Conclusions. In the current stage of societal development, characterized by the rapid growth of information, one of the most pressing tasks is to teach students how to master independent learning strategies. In this context, the goals of education are evolving. The emphasis is shifting towards the formation and development of learning activities, with a focus on equipping students not only with subject-specific knowledge but also with general intellectual skills. These skills are essential for the independent acquisition of knowledge across various fields of science and disciplines.

The organization of individual learning contributes significantly to the development of personal independence. Fostering independence in educational activities involves cultivating a desire in students to continually enhance their knowledge, as well as the ability to independently organize and conduct cognitive processes.

The prospects for further development of this topic lie in the need to explore methods of motivating students during the initial stages of setting educational goals and objectives. Additionally, it is essential to identify effective strategies for self-reflection, which will help students further improve their results and enhance their autonomous learning capabilities.

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