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Game space in the formation of cognitive and communicative competence of foreign students

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Abstract. *The article theoretically substantiates and practically illustrates the effectiveness of using modified game-based learning methods as an efficient means of forming foreign language communicative competence in international students.*

Purpose. *The study aims to analyze the contemporary application of educational*



*communication games, interactive charts, and folklore elements in teaching Ukrainian and English as foreign languages under distance learning challenges, and to systematically develop a three-tier classroom interaction model. **Methods.** The research is based on the communicative-activity approach, utilizing pedagogical observation, speech situation modeling, and the analysis of the authors' practical experience at the O. M. Beketov National University of Urban Economy in Kharkiv. **Results.** The classification of educational games for beginner international learners at the preparatory faculty has been systematized and theoretically expanded. A comprehensive three-tier model for foreign language lessons has been developed and structurally integrated, encompassing: a phonetic block (voice marathons, tongue twisters, homophone hunting), a lexical-grammatical block (interactive mapping, visual charts, and contrastive error deduction), and a strategic-cognitive block (situational role-plays, contextual proverbs, and learning style diagnostics). It is demonstrated that the systematic implementation of these gaming methods successfully bridges abstract language rules with students' actual communicative intentions. The role of communication games as a tool for psychological relaxation is characterized, showing how they help overcome language barriers, minimize the fear of making mistakes, and activate speech performance in an online learning environment. **Conclusions.** It is concluded that non-traditional forms of pedagogical interaction are highly effective for developing spontaneous speaking skills, overcoming communicative anxiety, and maintaining stable student engagement during forced online classes.*

Keywords: *game-based teaching methods, communicative competence, speech activity, Ukrainian as a Foreign Language (UFL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), online learning, overcoming language barriers, communicative anxiety.*



Ігровий простір у формуванні когнітивно-комунікативної компетентності іноземних студентів

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***Анотація.** У статті теоретично обґрунтовано та практично проілюстровано ефективність використання модифікованих ігрових методів навчання як дієвого засобу формування іншомовної комунікативної компетентності студентів-іноземців. **Мета.** Робота спрямована на аналіз сучасного стану використання навчальних мовних ігор, інтерактивних схем та елементів фольклору під час вивчення української та англійської мов як іноземних в умовах дистанційного навчання, а також на формування*



трикомпонентної моделі занять. **Методи.** Дослідження спирається на комунікативно-діяльнісний підхід із застосуванням методів педагогічного спостереження, моделювання мовленнєвих ситуацій та аналізу практичного досвіду авторів на базі Харківського національного університету міського господарства імені О. М. Бекетова. **Результати.** Систематизовано та теоретично доповнено класифікацію навчальних ігор для іноземних студентів початкового етапу навчання (підготовчого факультету). Обґрунтовано та впроваджено трикомпонентну модель мовних занять, що включає: фонетичний блок (мовні марафони, робота з омофонами), лексико-граматичний блок (інтерактивні карти, аналіз контрастивних помилок) та стратегічно-когнітивний блок (ситуативні рольові ігри, використання провідних стилів навчання). Доведено, що системне впровадження цих методів дозволяє поєднати вивчення мовних правил із реальними комунікативними потребами студентів. Охарактеризовано роль мовних ігор як засобу психологічного розвантаження, що допомагає подолати мовний бар'єр, мінімізує комунікативну тривожність і страх припуститися помилки в онлайн-середовищі. **Висновки.** Зроблено висновок про високу ефективність нетрадиційних форм педагогічної взаємодії для розвитку навичок спонтанного мовлення, подолання комунікативного страху та підтримки стабільної залученості студентів в умовах вимушеного онлайн-навчання.

Ключові слова: ігрові методи навчання, комунікативна компетентність, мовленнєва діяльність, українська мова як іноземна, англійська мова як іноземна, онлайн-навчання, подолання мовного бар'єру, комунікативна тривожність.

Problem statement. The modern paradigm of higher education in Ukraine operates under unprecedented security challenges, including prolonged blackouts and unstable internet connectivity. These destructive factors have forced a transition to distance and hybrid learning models. In the context of teaching Ukrainian as a



Foreign Language (UFL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the primary challenge is maintaining student engagement and ensuring the effective development of foreign language communicative competence (FLCC) without face-to-face interaction. Traditional methodology often fails in synchronous online settings during technical disruptions or periods of high student psycho-emotional stress. Consequently, there is an urgent need to adapt interactive teaching tools. Educational games, linguistic tasks, and elements of folklore (tongue twisters, proverbs, counting rhymes) possess significant potential not only as cognitive-communicative simulators but also as psychological coping strategies. However, their integration into the online learning space under crisis conditions requires systematic modification toward asynchronous adaptability and stress reduction.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Following A. Khutorskoy, modern Ukrainian researchers (O. Muntyan, L. Kovalchuk, and others) draw a clear terminological distinction between "competence" (a normatively defined educational standard) and "competence" as the practical experience of live communication shaped through game simulations. In the research of S. Yermolenko, communicative competence is directly oriented toward the practical aspect of language learning (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) [5, p. 42]. These skills are based on a clear awareness of speech actions and their structure [10, p. 47].

The utilization of game-based technologies in UFL and EFL has become a leading vector in modern higher education. In modern linguodidactics, games trigger the need to speak, solve student motivation, and act as cognitive-communicative simulators. As thoroughly justified in recent studies, the primary advantage of a linguistic game lies in its creative nature, which activates cognitive processes [10; 14]. Following O. O. Muntyan, it is important to emphasize that gaming activity performs a complex of interconnected functions that optimize the assimilation of language material: the educational, entertainment, communicative, relaxation (relieving emotional tension), and psychotechnic functions [10; 14]. Concurrently, interactive approaches act as an essential condition for optimizing the professional



training framework for international students within modern higher educational environments [14, p. 130].

Based on the structural and functional approach, modern researchers (O. V. Myronenko, O. A. Boichuk, L. M. Kovalchuk) classify educational games into specific operational categories: board and interactive digital games, competitive tasks, structural-spatial games using maps, text-reconstruction activities, and situational role-playing sketches [4; 5; 7]. These tools are subdivided by target sub-competences: phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and speech-oriented games [4; 5; 7]. O. A. Boichuk (2023) demonstrates that digital platforms like LearningApps allow for a differentiated vocabulary-building approach [4, p. 196], while L. M. Kovalchuk (2026) notes the didactic value of gamification in mastering grammatical categories [5, p. 112].

The organizational basis for these processes is rooted in the interactive model of O. I. Pometun and L. V. Pyrozhenko (2005), which turns a passive student into an active participant [11]. The practical development of oral skills during the initial stage of language learning and effective models for stimulating spontaneous speaking skills among foreign learners are further explored in specialized institutional studies [6]. Expanding these principles to specialized target audiences, I. V. Valchenko and G. P. Sokolova (2024) developed comprehensive educational programs designed for foreign citizens preparing to enter Ukrainian higher education institutions, focusing on humanities and language proficiency [1].

In the context of optimization, N. Y. Piast (2010) considers language games a highly effective method that stimulates intellectual potential, forms communicative readiness, and accelerates overall student progress [13]. This aligns with the intercultural approach examined by I. Barantsova and Yu. Nadolska (2022), who state that cross-cultural interaction facilitates smoother academic integration for international students [3, p. 7]. Optimization under modern crisis conditions is linked with technological and psychological adaptations. T. V. Andrushchenko (2024) highlights that distance learning methods must account for constant distress, making



gamification a vital tool for academic resilience [2, p. 88]. O. K. Stepanenko, T. V. Lanova, and L. M. Matuselych (2022) emphasize that innovative educational designs significantly accelerate the adaptation of foreign learners [15]. Pedagogical conditions required to manage communicative anxiety and overcome language barriers—specifically for target groups like Chinese learners—are analyzed in depth by N. S. Morgunova (2022) [8; 9].

Concurrently, international language pedagogy (2023–2026) has advanced in exploring Game-Based Language Learning (GBLL). K. Abell and J. Ramey (2023) introduced Narrative Game-Based Learning, asserting that story structures encourage purposeful language application [16, p. 89]. M. Adipat et al. (2024) experimentally proved the link between gaming and the reduction of linguistic anxiety, leading to improved oral proficiency [17, p. 204]. T. Green and L. Martinez (2025) investigated the convergence of games and AI, showing how Natural Language Processing (NLP) turns educational games into two-way communicative platforms [18, p. 43]. O. Palinska and O. Shvets (2025) emphasize the role of digital game spaces in modern language acquisition [19, p. 114]. Finally, a meta-analysis by S. J. Reynolds (2026) notes that each type of game simulation contributes uniquely to the linguistic, strategic, sociocultural, and emotional components of communicative competence [20, p. 15]. This approach is deeply rooted in the activity theory of the Kharkiv psychological school (representatives of L. Vygotsky's school: O. Leontiev, P. Halperyn, O. Zaporozhets, L. Bozhovych), which views activity as a mechanism for transitioning from a potential level of development to an actual one.

Research Purpose and Objectives. Based on the critical gaps identified in recent literature, the primary purpose of this study is to theoretically substantiate and practically demonstrate the effectiveness of using modified game-based technologies as an adaptive framework for forming foreign language communicative competence in UFL and EFL online classes under crisis and remote educational environments in Ukraine. To achieve this scientific purpose, the following research



objectives were formulated: to systematize contemporary theoretical classifications of pedagogical games and adapt them to the unique psychological needs of beginner international learners at the preparatory faculty; to develop and structurally integrate a modified three-tier game model encompassing phonetic, lexical-grammatical, and strategic-communicative blocks; to empirically evaluate the practical implementation of these gamified tools within the digital system of the O. M. Beketov National University of Urban Economy in Kharkiv, specifically focusing on their dual role as linguistic simulators and stress-reducing coping strategies.

Presentation of the Main Material. The communicative and cognitive-communicative approach, adopted in modern methodology as a guiding principle, implies the acquisition by international students of the ability to practically use the target language in real communication situations. This process relies heavily on intensive, authentic language development. A foreign student is forced to enter into communication from the very first day of their educational path, which often causes severe psychological stress when meeting an unfamiliar reality. Consequently, the educator's primary task is to facilitate the language learning process, make remote communication accessible, and effectively mitigate emotional tension. According to the principles of communicative-cognitive learning, language proficiency represents the capacity to solve diverse communicative tasks using structured language means. Within this framework, communicative competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to understand speech in both sound and graphic forms, to express thoughts orally and in writing, thereby ensuring successful communication.

One of the most effective pedagogical tools for developing these skills under contemporary educational challenges is game-based teaching methodology. A pedagogical game possesses a clearly defined learning goal and a corresponding predicted outcome, allowing international learners to relatively easily apply formed speech skills to solve practical tasks independently. During a game, students discover and evaluate their linguistic capabilities, which accelerates their creative



potential and transforms the classroom into a dynamic communication field. The essence of gaming as a mode of interaction lies in the acquisition of knowledge through continuous dialogue and polylogue.

Within the competence-based framework of distance and hybrid learning, these tools are systematically subdivided by the targeted sub-competences being formed: phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and speech-oriented communicative games [4; 5; 7]. Systemic integration of these activities contributes significantly to the development of students' communication skills due to several core methodological features. First, games maximize student interest and ensure active consolidation of newly acquired speech skills. Second, game-based learning establishes a relaxed, stress-free atmosphere that models real-life interaction, allowing students to unlock their communicative potential and naturally dismantle psychological language barriers. Third, the volume of students' independent speech activity increases substantially, while pair work and collective answers help mitigate the fear of making a mistake. Finally, during these activities, the teacher's role shifts from a rigid instructor to an objective observer and diagnostic field coordinator, recording common linguistic errors for subsequent structural analysis.

Thus, language games serve as a simple and efficient way to bring the remote learning process closer to the real language element, preventing communicative situations from being perceived as unnatural or redundant. Empirical evidence shows that game-based learning forms not only specific linguistic abilities but also general cognitive operations, including planning and critical thinking, which enhances the self-management mechanisms of the student's personality [13].

To practically demonstrate these principles at the preparatory faculty, let us analyze several modified game structures integrated within the phonetic, lexicogrammatical, and strategic-communicative blocks of instruction.

1. **Phonetic Block: Developing Articulatory and Orthographic Accuracy.** Under distance learning constraints, developing phonetic awareness and speech-rate adaptation requires specific tools to overcome the acoustic distance and transmission



limitations of online platforms. A highly effective method is the "Voice Marathon of Tongue Twisters" implemented via synchronous communication channels [6]. Students record and exchange rapid voice messages, focusing on the differentiation of challenging sound combinations. In UFL classes, this tool serves to automate complex consonant clusters and rare sound alternations at the initial stage of learning. A prime empirical example is the tongue twister targeting the articulation of [ts], [b], [r]: «Був собі цебер, та й перецебрився. Прийшов цебрик, перецебрував цебра...».

To activate auditory "memory keys" (rhyme, rhythm, and acoustic mnemonics), this block incorporates parallel homophone-based challenges, such as the "Homophone Hunt" [14]. Students, while studying the lexical topic "Climate. Seasons. Weather," analyze contextual poetic drills to decode semantic differences between identical-sounding words with different syntactical profiles (e.g., the conjunction *whether*, the noun *weather*, and the corresponding verb). The core structural pattern utilized involves the classic poetic drill: "*Whether the weather be fine... Or whether the weather be not, Whether the weather be cold Or whether the weather be hot, We'll weather the weather, Whatever the weather, Whether we like it or not.*" This is a perfect example to demonstrate to students the richness of the language!

This dynamic cognitive accelerator does not require high internet bandwidth, builds orthographic accuracy, and significantly reduces linguistic anxiety through structured poetic rhythm. Following the initial visual model, strict temporal limitations (a 1-minute digital visualization review via screen sharing) are introduced, after which students independently generate contextual mini-dialogues using target pairs (*sea/see, meat/meet, write/right*, etc): "*I'm on a seafood diet. When I see food, I eat it.*". This combination of phonological and semantic exercises accelerates vocabulary retention and builds self-confidence during remote interactions.



2. Lexico-Grammatical and Analytical Block: Automation of Morphosyntactic Structures. The primary challenge of online language training for beginner international learners at the preparatory faculty is the multi-level drill of complex grammatical forms without causing cognitive fatigue. Gamification solves this problem by turning abstract paradigms into a communicative dynamic. In teaching UFL, this approach is critically valuable when mastering the category of prefixed verbs of motion. Instead of traditional tables, the interactive game "Treasure Hunt" utilizes an illustrated map-scheme demonstrated on the screen. Working in digital micro-groups of three, students "pass" the same spatial route multiple times, where each participant is assigned a strict grammatical perspective to reinforce structural accuracy and verbal aspect variation: *The first student* explains the route using infinitive forms to establish the basic verbal stem ("*to enter the museum, to cross the bridge, to go around the carousel...*"). *The second student* transforms the entire sequence into the future tense form to drill aspectual prefixes ("*you will enter the museum, you will cross the bridge...*"). *The third student* comments on the immediate actions using the present or past perfect forms ("*S. enter the museum*" / "*A. went to the museum, took the key, left the museum...*").

Repeated variations of these spatial routes (linking environments such as a forest, beach, or university) allow beginners to perform speech actions multiple times and correctly use verbs of motion with prefixes in different tense forms without experiencing psychological fatigue.

A parallel tool used in the UFL framework is the conceptual mapping of local urban spaces, exemplified by the game "How I go to the university" based on the official scheme of the Kharkiv metro system. Since the topic of "city and country" is being studied at this stage, students have a good grasp of the city's places and locations (although unfortunately, it's still "online"). Students compose a short, personalized narrative about their route to the academic building, intentionally omitting key logistical details or verbs of direction ("*First, I take trolleybus #1 to the 'Palace of Sports' station... From 'Sportyvna' station I change to the green*



line...”). When exchanging these texts in pairs, peers must fill in the missing structural details based on the shared geographical context of university dormitories, shifting the focus from mechanical writing to a meaningful problem-solving dialogue.

To further eliminate systemic grammatical errors involving prepositions, double negatives, or indefinite pronouns (*some/any/no...*), the visual game "Spot the Error" is introduced. Students analyze contrastive sentence pairs where one option is structurally incorrect (e.g., “*I didn’t meet nobody*” vs. “*I didn’t meet anybody*”; “*She doesn’t listen me*” vs. “*She doesn’t listen to me*”). By visually covering the correct options on the screen, the pedagogical flow shifts from passive copying to conscious error deduction, which is crucial for establishing accurate communication habits.

To master complex grammatical topics such as the degrees of comparison, parallel syntactic structures, and structural exceptions, a cross-linguistically recognized and famous (in many languages) humorous paradoxical poem is integrated into the lesson structure. This activity serves as an intensive cognitive reflex and a stress-relieving wrap-up tool at the final stage of the synchronous online session: “*The more we study, the more we know; The more we know, the more we forget; The more we forget, the less we know; The less we know, the less we forget; The less we forget, the more we know. Why study?*” From a didactic point of view, this micro-game triggers deep and genuine interest among international students. The implementation of this humorous rhyme effectively mitigates linguistic anxiety and solidifies the structural pattern of parallel comparative constructions using the target modifiers “*the more..., the more...*” and “*the more..., the less...*”. It allows foreign learners to practice intricate language structures in an informal, highly authentic situations, transforming abstract syntax rules into an engaging cognitive challenge that prevents mental fatigue (for example, other phrases-idioms: *as cool as a cucumber*,).



3. Strategic and Cognitive-Communicative Block: Psychological Coping and Competence Simulation. Beyond purely linguistic goals, modified game technologies function as vital psychological coping strategies in the contemporary educational landscape. Interacting in a simulated environment allows international students to reconstruct real-life scenarios, triggering a deep psychological reorientation that helps overcome emotional barriers and manage communicative anxiety caused by the persistent fear of misunderstanding native speakers.

The core of this block for beginner learners at the preparatory faculty is situational role-playing, exemplified by the game "Visiting the Theater." Students model real-life social interactions (demonstrating how they navigate to the venue and purchase tickets), actively using facial expressions, gestures, and vocal intonation as visual and emotional memory anchors. The transitional flow from "spectators" to "actors" – where learners play active, non-choreographed roles based on previously analyzed texts (e.g., *"First Time in the Theater"*) – intensively stimulates spontaneous speaking skills and models natural interpersonal dialogue.

To effectively manage cognitive fatigue during synchronous online sessions, these activities are integrated with 10-minute *"Just for Rest"* conversational intervals and cognitive profiling tasks, such as the *"What's your learning style?"* matrix. Students select and justify their psychological and educational preferences (Visual, Social, Auditory, Solitary, etc.) using target speech patterns and grammatical anchors like *"I prefer using..."* or *"I prefer to use..."* This approach provides the educator with essential diagnostic data about the learners' cognitive profiles – information that is otherwise extremely difficult to gather remotely – enabling a more customized instructional framework.

To ensure the deep assimilation of complex syntactic structures, such as conditional constructions (Conditional Sentences), the pedagogical framework incorporates highly engaging, real-life contextual tasks and situational simulations. Instead of standard mechanical drills, students are required to analyze contemporary, high-interest prompts and express their immediate psychological reactions to high-

impact scenarios: A) “*If Elon Musk called you right now, what would you say to him?*” or version B) “*Which famous person could say the following words: 'If I had been President then, this war would never have started...?'*”

From a didactical perspective, this situational assignment effectively bridges the gap between abstract grammar paradigms and actual communicative intentions by shifting the interaction into a semi-authentic, real-world simulated environment. Incorporating a globally recognized contemporary figure activates the learners' immediate personal interest and cognitive background. Psychologically, this method serves as an effective coping strategy that lowers communicative anxiety; because the foreign student's cognitive focus shifts from strict analytical monitoring (the paralyzing fear of making a mistake) to the substance of a simulated live phone call, spontaneous speech production is naturally triggered. Consequently, this situational approach transforms remote grammar learning into an active problem-solving dialogue, fostering linguistic resilience and structural flexibility.

Finally, within the global lexical topic “*Profession and Work*” (in accordance with the preparatory faculty program developed by the authors [1]), an interactive ethnolinguistic component is integrated, such as “*20 golden proverbs about money & work*” (e.g., “*Don't put your eggs in one basket*”). This collection sharpens the students' professional outlook while reinforcing the grammatical aspect of the imperative mood, successfully bridging the gap between abstract syntax rules and actual communicative intentions.

Conclusions. The analysis of contemporary pedagogical sources and the practical study conducted demonstrate that game-based learning has evolved from an auxiliary teaching tool into a complex, emergent educational framework. In the modern methodology of teaching UFL and EFL under modern challenges, gamification serves as a dual-purpose system: it systematically integrates linguistic knowledge into active speech intentions while simultaneously functioning as a vital psychological coping strategy that lowers communicative anxiety and removes language barriers.



The systemic implementation of modified game technologies – ranging from high-paced phonetic marathons to interactive mapping, error deduction, and situational role-plays – yields several distinct advantages for distance and hybrid higher education. First, it ensures the real, measurable development of global oral proficiency and listening skills by exposing learners to peer-to-peer interactions with diverse linguistic variations and speech accents. Second, it accelerates the linguistic adaptation and engagement of international students within the virtual classroom space, unlocking their creative potential and shifting the educational paradigm toward a highly collaborative online polylogue. Furthermore, the integration of these tools allows educators to unobtrusively track student progress and compile accurate cognitive profiles based on individual learning preferences.

Summarizing the empirical evidence, this study proves that non-standard forms of pedagogical interaction – such as gamified communicative spaces, contextual case studies, and real-world simulations – are crucial for maintaining student engagement during forced online learning and high psycho-emotional stress. Such tools effectively transform a passive remote classroom into an active diagnostic and communicative environment. This approach fosters the development of socially active, linguistically flexible, and professionally competent future specialists who are capable of successful real-world communication with native speakers.

Prospects for further research lie in the deeper investigation of advanced gamification models, specifically exploring how interactive platforms and digital tools can be used to adapt customized, asynchronous learning trajectories to match the evolving cognitive preferences of foreign students.

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