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Research article

Mediation as a Component of Communicative Competence in Training International Relations Professionals: Collaboration Between Russia and Kazakhstan

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Abstract. The world lives in the era of conflict, when the safety and well-being of states or individuals to a large extent depend on the availability of well-trained professionals who are able to perform mediating functions, keeping in mind ethnic, national, political, cultural and other differences between conflicting sides. However, employers increasingly claim that today's graduates lack the skills required for conflict management and mediation even in homogeneous working environments, let alone multinational teams and international interaction. This problem is particularly relevant for the field of international relations where conflict resolution by peaceful means is very important. Countries with transition economies, such as Russia and Kazakhstan, where there is a gap between labor market requirements and university teaching practices, have been searching for new ways to educate and train young specialists. This article presents the preliminary results of a collaborative project between Petrozavodsk State University of the Russian Federation and Gumilyov Eurasian National University of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The project includes a set of dialogue- and polylogue-based learning activities with special focus on addressing any discrepancies, misunderstandings and divergence of views. The aim of the paper is to assess the impact of professionally oriented cross-border communication in the English language on the readiness of international relations students from Russia and Kazakhstan for resolving future professional disputes through mediation. The authors used formal structured questionnaires with closed-ended questions for obtaining necessary data and the comparative analysis method for interpreting them. The results suggest that systematic English-language cross-border communication in a realistic work-like environment will demonstrate the importance of mediation as a component of professional communicative competence to the students and will better prepare future foreign affairs staff for conflict resolution and mediation.

Keywords: mediation, cross-border dialogue, dialogue-stimulating activities, mediation readiness



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INTRODUCTION

Moving towards the knowledge economy requires rapid human capital development, therefore, it is important to provide young professionals with a set of skills and competences that will enable them to stand up to increasingly complex professional challenges, manage their own career and personal development, acquire, use and generate new knowledge, and effectively evaluate individual and collective achievements and failures. These demands are especially urgent in the field of international relations, because the number of conflicts in various spheres of life is on the rise, with “unresolved regional tensions, breakdowns in the rule of law, illicit economic gains and the scarcity of resources exacerbated by climate change being the dominant drivers of conflict” (United Nations, 2020).

However, according to the survey “Russia 2025: Resetting the Talents Balance” (2017), 80% of working-age Russians are unprepared for conflicting working environments and resolving conflicts. Employees report that many young professionals are not capable of or ready for problem-solving tasks, accountability and open expression of their personal and professional views. Middle managers and senior executives also emphasize that graduates often lack such universal competences as self-regulation, autonomous motivation and willingness to independently pursue life-long learning (“Employees’ View on Generation Z”, 2019). A similar situation exists in the Republic of Kazakhstan, one of Russia’s key post-Soviet partners. Recent OECD data show that the country’s higher education system does not pay proper attention to the relevant universal skills of the 21st century (Bayzhanova, 2019), including problem-solving techniques, teamwork skills, and adaptability. These professional qualities play a key role in career success and in the wellbeing of employees in general. The lack of them leads to the situation when after graduation young people in Kazakhstan are unemployed, underemployed, have low incomes or work outside the chosen area of expertise (Bureau of National Statistics, 2019). This indicates a wide gap between higher education institutions, the labor market, and the workforce. The situation seems precarious for all the spheres, but in international relations it raises special concerns, because here people’s lives and countries’ fates are at stake.

The demands for conflict management knowledge and skills do not come only from the employers; they are clearly set forth in official higher education standards.

In Russia, FGOS 3++ standard (2016) lists the following mandatory professional competences for the students of international relations:

- ability to work in a team, embracing social, ethnical, confessional and cultural differences;
- being aware of the requirements of politically correct corporate culture in order to be engaged in effective formal and informal cross-border communication and find compromise through negotiation;
- ability to adjust to working in multiethnic international teams and use certain special features of foreign professional cultures for effective professional communication, when necessary;
- understanding the mechanisms of international conflict management through the use of various diplomatic, political, legal, psychological, social, economic and enforcement methods.

A similar standard for the Republic of Kazakhstan (2010) contains the following requirements for the graduates with international relations degrees:

- comprehensive understanding of modern conflicts, their types, mechanisms and regulation, and their impact on international relations;
- knowledge and adequate use of the concepts and terms of modern conflict resolution studies;
- awareness of what various international relations theories and approaches say about modern conflict management;
- ability to theorize, analyze, systematize and reflect on professional issues and conflicts;
- knowledge of specific features of modern conflicts and ability to resolve them effectively.

In practice, this means that these specialists are expected to engage in cross-cultural communication from the perspective of diversity, integrate people representing different cultures into effective working teams, and choose optimal behavior and patterns for mediating conflicts in multicultural working environments.

1. Literature Review

In the context of this study, from the theoretical and methodological perspective mediation was seen as a communication strategy aimed at effective conflict solving. Communication in the sphere of international relations is not possible without complex negotiations with existing or future partners, discussing the terms of contracts, resolving disputes, project collaboration, teleconferencing, online meetings, etc. All these actions take the form of a dialogue or polylogue. Therefore, dialogue or polylogue construction in a process of mediation in the English language is a mandatory component of social, media or political discourse. Professional dialogue can be defined as a special functional category of spoken language, distinguished by specific stylistic patterns

(Shatilov, 2012). Work-related discussions or negotiations, unlike everyday conversations, pay special attention to the formal expression of thoughts, accuracy and unambiguity of statements, correct use of terms, and adherence to language norms (Malyuga, 2011). A properly structured dialogue is a very effective instrument of international communications, which helps peer employees, partners or conflicting sides to understand each other, accept different points of view, identify discrepancies and find compromises. It gives an impetus to creative and productive cooperation, reduces the risk of misjudgment, and ensures more effective interaction (Lauring & Selmer, 2012).

Polylogue-based encounters in the English language are also an integral part of effective professional communication in many multinational teams. Polylogue is a form of a dialogue that ensures meaningful information exchange for complementary or competitive discussions (Kruglova, 2001) and joint professional decision-making. This type of communication is crucial for promoting innovative collective ideas and building new partnerships with foreign experts and clients, rather than defending individual positions or winning negotiation points (Devi & Zanariah, 2012). Any misunderstandings or disagreements prevent the stakeholders from resolving conflicts by formulating common positions and developing the situation into something that will be accepted by all sides (Prescott, 2011). Learning how to use appropriate strategies for professional communication in English helps to overcome various barriers, thus contributing to building confidence and trust among employees or partners with different cultural backgrounds. Such comfortable environment has a tremendous impact on companies' productivity, success, competitiveness and profitability (Tenzer et. al., 2014).

Teaching professional English dialogue and polylogue skills to non-linguistic students is a serious challenge for English teachers due to various reasons. In the majority of Russian universities it is traditionally done by creating artificial bilingual environment. However, the variety of English classroom activities is limited, which eventually makes them repetitive and predictable. This is very different from live interaction, with all its diversity and spontaneity – especially in the context of political or media discourse. It decreases the productivity of teaching and learning, makes students unprepared for cross-cultural professional functioning in multinational corporate settings, and eventually leads to communication barriers and failures (Gluszek et. al., 2011). Classroom dialogues or polylogues typically contain a fixed number of questions and answers on a given topic, used for receiving anticipated information from familiar people – peers or teachers. In real-life professional situations, when dialogues are often constructed between strangers, the goal of communication is much more complex: interlocutors need to address an issue from different perspectives and understand or interpret the responses and reactions properly (Rogerson-Revell, 2008) Teaching dialogic and polylogic communication is also complicated by its bilateral or multilateral nature, which implies strong interdependence of communication partners. The efficiency of interaction in this case is determined by specific verbal patterns, speed and explicitness of speech production, temperament characteristics, status of interlocutors and various other factors (Vorauer, 2006).

Therefore, it can be assumed that conventional classroom practices and activities within an enclosed learning space with a limited number of peers will not prepare students for future professional challenge management and conflict resolution. This paper describes an attempt to minimize these limitations by expanding learning environment and making learning experience more unpredictable. In doing so, special attention was paid to creating convenient online channels for the exchange of information, following the established standards and practices of professional communication, using diverse technologies, and giving more freedom of choice to the students, along with delegating more organizational functions and assigning more responsibility to them.

2. Research Question and Hypothesis

The following research question was designed to guide the study: which teaching and learning activities can have a significant impact on professional mediation readiness and cross-border communication skills of non-linguistic students with different national and cultural backgrounds? In accordance with the study aim and research question the following hypothesis was formulated in order to be confirmed or rejected through the analysis of the survey data: professionally oriented cross-border communication in the English language involving the search for compromise solutions and consideration of different views will raise the students' awareness of mediation as an important form of international interaction, and therefore will make them better prepared for it. Therefore, the study was aimed at investigating the preparedness and willingness of Russian and Kazakh students of international relations for productive dialogue and mediation in the English-language professional-like environment.

3. Materials and Methods

The described study is the second stage of the cross-border interuniversity project between Petrozavodsk State University (PetrSU) and Eurasian National University (ENU) that was launched in 2019. It involved 80 second-year students majoring in international relations from two partnering universities – Petrozavodsk State University (PetrSU, Russia, n=40) and Gumilyov Eurasian National University (ENU, Kazakhstan, n=40). The age of the participants varied from 18 to 20, and their gender was not considered significant for the research outcomes. Before the enrollment, the participants were classified into the upper-intermediate category according to the results of the standardized EFL test (EF SET).

The study process presented in this paper was organized in three successive stages: 1) a pre-survey, 2) a set of collaborative dialogue- or polylogue-stimulating and mediation-simulating activities, and 3) a post-survey. The pre-survey and the post-survey included one identical question in order to measure the impact of the described project on the study participants. The results were assessed through the comparative analysis of data collected by the means of formal structured questionnaires with closed-ended questions.

4. Results and Discussion

The pre-survey was aimed at identifying the spheres prioritized by the Russian and Kazakh participants and at assessing their readiness for cross-border dialogue and mediation. It included two closed questions, the first one being “Which professional spheres would you choose to work in?” The respondents were given five answer options in a multiple-choice format: human rights protection, global security, sustainable development, countering extremism, and crime prevention. The comparative dissemination of the preferences is demonstrated on Figure 1.

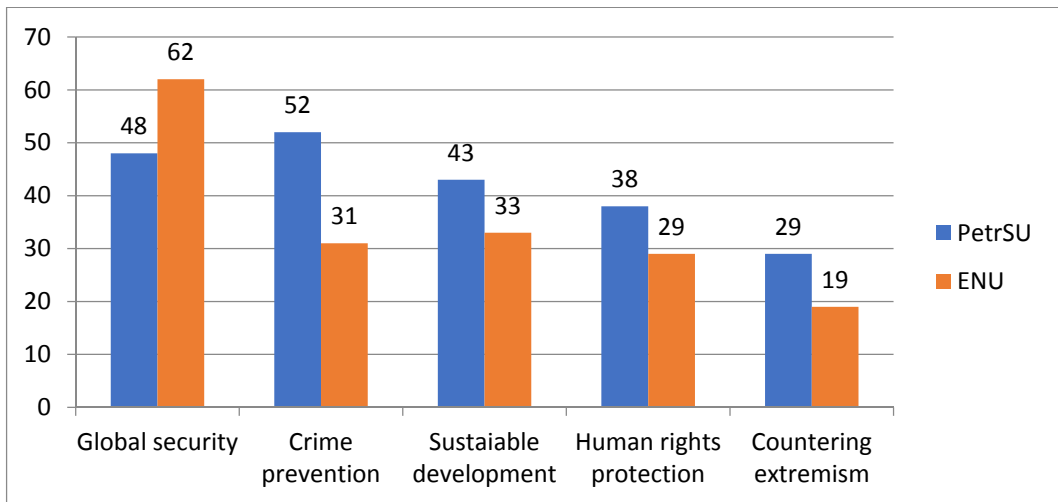


Figure 1. Pre-survey results: dissemination of professional sphere preferences among PetrSU and ENU students

The results showed that ENU students in general were less interested in the suggested areas with global security being the only exception – 62% of participants from Kazakhstan chose this option as their professional priority, while only 48% of Russian respondents were interested in this sphere. Fifty two percent of PetrSU students, in turn, picked crime prevention as their main preference (compared with only 31% of ENU students). Both PetrSU and ENU subjects showed their least interest in countering extremism (29% and 19%, respectively). Such discrepancies require further investigation and analysis. For the purpose of this research, however, it was important that building teaching activities around these five issues was likely to have a high didactic potential for teaching dialogue and mediation, since each side would need to promote the issue it found more urgent and engage the other side into meaningful and productive communication.

The participants were also asked to assess the probability of performing a mediating role in their future career using five possible ratings, ranking from “highly likely”

to “highly unlikely”. It was assumed that choosing “highly likely” and “likely” options would reflect the students’ readiness for dialogue and mediation, while choosing “highly unlikely” and “unlikely” options would evidence to the contrary. The answers are shown in the graphs below.

The graphs demonstrate more variability among ENU students’ responses – i.e., PetrSU students avoided choosing the extreme options of the assessment scale (“highly likely” or “highly unlikely”). However, after pooling the answers of those who were and were not ready for mediation, both study groups were comparable in three main indicators: readiness for mediation, uncertainty and unpreparedness (47%, 23% and 30% vs 47%, 25% and 28%, respectively). Thus, the pre-survey helped to identify topics that would appeal to both sides and topics that could create barriers to dialogue, since one side found them more relevant. It also confirmed the readiness of all participants for cross-border communication that always bears a risk of misunderstanding and controversy, thus requiring conflict management and mediation skills.

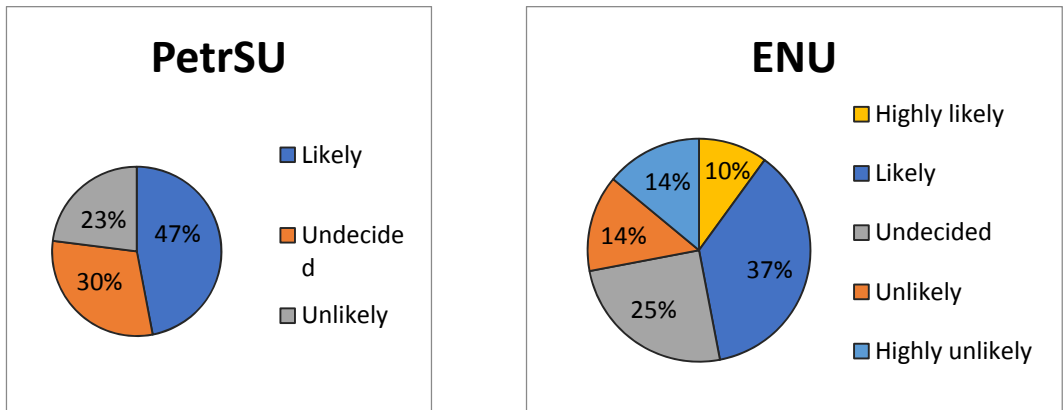


Figure 2. Pre-survey results: readiness of PetrSU and ENU students to perform professional mediation functions

After obtaining the initial answers, the study organizers immersed the participating students into a specifically designed learning environment based on a system of collaborative educational activities implemented over three semesters. In other words, the study participants were involved into a number of dialogue and polylogue-based activities, including briefings, video-debates, online discussions, and interviews. All these activities were aimed at student’s professional socialization and developing two distinctive sets of skills: 1) mediation skills, including active listening, emotional intelligence, reflection, thoughtful judgment, stress management, negotiation, empathy, reliance on intuition, impartiality, positivity and open communication (Mediation Skills, 2020; A Practical Guide to Work-Integrated Learning, n.d.); and 2) universal soft skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, team work, collaboration, ICT (information, communication and technology) literacy, and conflict management (Fadel, 2008). For that purpose, special attention was paid to finding

mutually acceptable compromises in such situations as setting convenient dates and time for meetings, choosing the most relevant topics, or finding common grounds on sensitive issues during online discussions. This was achieved with the help of a standard mediation model which comprises the following steps: formal contact between the sides, issue identification, generation and evaluation of possible alternatives, selection of appropriate (mutually accepted) alternatives, and conclusion (Mitchell & Dewhrist, 1991).

After all the activities were completed, a post-survey was conducted in order to assess the increase in the readiness for cross-border dialogue and mediation. The participants once again were asked the question: “What is the probability of you performing a mediating role in your future career?” with the same five options they were given during the pre-survey. The number of ENU students who answered “likely” slightly increased (from 37% to 42%), and the number of students who answered “highly unlikely” decreased accordingly (from 14% to 9%). The changes in the mediation readiness of PetrSU students were more significant and are presented in the graph below.

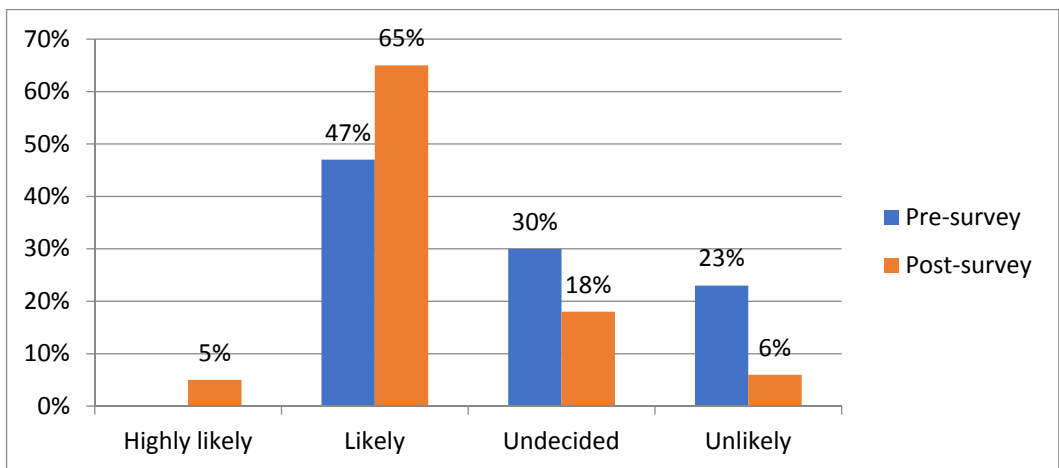


Figure 3. Readiness of PetrSU students to perform professional mediation functions before and after cross-border learning activities

The graph shows that the number of PetrSU students who described the suggested probability as likely increased from 47% to 65%, 5% of respondents chose the option “highly likely”, and the number of undecided students and those who thought it was “unlikely” for them to be involved in professional mediation in the future decreased (by 12% and 17%, respectively).

To confirm the participants’ readiness for cross-cultural communication (as a prerequisite for international mediation and, therefore, an important component of their professional competence) they were asked an additional closed question: “Who do you think you will interact with in your future professional capacity?” and were given four

answer options in a single-choice format: native English speakers, non-native English speakers, both categories, and speakers of the respondents' native languages (Russian or Kazakh). The majority of PetrSU and ENU students (62% and 64%, respectively) chose the option "both native and non-native English speakers" and the option of using only mother tongue for interaction was not selected by anyone. This suggests that the participants are fully aware of the importance and advantages of English as the language of professional communication and mediation. The obtained data support the initial hypothesis that regular professionally oriented cross-border communication in the English language between the students of different national and cultural backgrounds majoring in international relations will increase their readiness for future professional conflict solving and mediation, if it focuses on overcoming discrepancies and finding compromises.

5. Concluding Remarks

Although Russia and Kazakhstan are currently going through social and economic transformations, there are gaps between labor market requirements and university teaching practices in these countries. Employers are gradually implementing western workflows and management systems, which include conflict management mechanisms. Therefore, modern specialists need to know how to choose optimal strategies for reducing tensions and resolving disputes. The ability to do so determines organizational capacity and competitiveness. It also fosters communication and collaboration within a company and beyond.

Despite various state supportive measures, today's young people remain one of the most vulnerable categories of labor market actors. After getting their degrees they face many problems, because they cannot find a job according to their degrees, do not have sufficient working experience, and are not familiar with current labor market tendencies and mechanisms. The fact that youth employment remains such a challenge could be explained by a discrepancy between the level of the young people's professional competence (and their readiness for real-life work settings) and the requirements of modern economy. In today's times of rapid global changes, the future of many long-existing occupations, which provided stable incomes for several generations, seems dim. It deepens the gap between business and education practices, as well as between supply and demand for qualified workforce.

One of the possible ways to solve this problem is to integrate curricular learning with workplace-like experience, so that students would be able to combine theory and practice in a real-world communication environment, which will deepen their knowledge and understanding, and will enhance their work-related capabilities (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010). Such approach will help to create optimal learning conditions for teaching conflict solving and mediation, which will meet the following requirements: challenging students' preconceptions in light of new experience, giving students more opportunities to reflect and apply their knowledge and skills to resolve

real-life issues, providing students with experience in a wider real-world environment; individualizing each student's learning by addressing their specific perceptions, thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns (A practical guide to work-integrated learning, n.d.). Another important thing that should be kept in mind is that today both international and domestic mediators are increasingly involved in disputes between non-native English-speakers, who use the same global language but represent distinctive ethnic or national backgrounds. Therefore, in order to train students for future dialogue and mediation with bilinguals, it is not enough to provide them with cultural knowledge regarding those countries where English is a state language. Indeed, at the earlier stages of professional education they will need some general strategies for cross-cultural communication, based on universally accepted values and principles, such as tolerance, non-discrimination, freedom of opinion, respect for diversity, etc. However, it does not exclude the necessity of regional or country-specific focus during the further course of study, especially in developing and maintaining long-term partnerships with foreign universities. This will help to build a solid foundation for safe professional communication and effective management or prevention of conflicts.

RESEARCH DISCLAIMER

- The results of the described study are valid for only its participants, the second-year students majoring in international relations. Further research is necessary in order to establish whether the same effect can be observed for the students majoring in exact, engineering or life sciences.
- The paper presents the results of one stage of a long-term interuniversity project, and subsequent data will be described in further publications after the next stages are completed.
- The authors define mediation as one of the English language communication strategies, therefore linguistic data (including diction, correct use of grammar and pronunciation) were taken into account, but were not described in order to keep the intended focus of the paper.

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