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Developing the Spoken English of Future Economists through a Sociocultural Approach: A Methodological Model and Experimental Evidence

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Abstract. This article examines how a sociocultural approach can be used to develop the spoken English of students who major in economics at higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. It describes the structure of a pedagogical model and reports the results of an experiment involving 487 students at Gulistan State University, Tashkent State Transport University and Samarkand State Technical University, of whom 246 formed the experimental groups and 241 the control groups. The outcomes of the two sets of groups were compared with the Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney U test. At the start of the study the groups did not differ significantly ($Z_{emp} = 0.82 < 1.96$). By the end, the share of high-level students in the experimental groups had grown from 10.98% to 30.89% (a factor of 2.81), while the share of low-level students had fallen from 50.41% to 15.04% (a factor of 3.35). The empirical value $Z_{emp} = 3.94$ exceeded the critical value of 1.96, and the null hypothesis was therefore rejected. The findings suggest that teaching language together with its social, cultural and professional context is an effective way of building oral communicative competence in future economists.

Keywords: sociocultural approach, oral communicative competence, economic communication, role-play, case study, Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney U test, pragmatic appropriateness.

Introduction

Economic globalisation, the growth of international trade and the close interlinking of multinational companies have changed what employers expect from an economist. Subject knowledge is no longer enough. A graduate is expected to negotiate with foreign partners, present an investment proposal, argue a point in an economic debate and do all of this in English, coherently and in line with the norms of intercultural communication.

Classroom practice, however, often falls short of this expectation. In non-philological programmes, including economics faculties, foreign languages are still taught mainly through grammar and vocabulary. Students come to know the rules and a fair number of economic terms, yet in live conversation they struggle to use them appropriately, to take the interlocutor's sociocultural background into account and to overcome cultural and psychological barriers. In other words, they know about the language but have not learned to use it as a communicative tool.

A sociocultural approach offers a way to close this gap. It treats language not as an abstract system of signs but as a phenomenon inseparable from a society's values, traditions, social norms and professional etiquette. The aim of the present study was to develop a methodological model for building the spoken English of economics students on this basis, to test it in practice and to verify its effectiveness with a statistical criterion.

1.1. Theoretical and methodological background

The approach rests on Vygotsky's ideas about social interaction, Hymes's model of communicative competence, and the work of Brown, Canale and Swain, Byram and Kramsch on communicative and intercultural competence [1–6]. In Vygotsky's account, every higher mental function, speech activity included, first appears between people (the interpsychological plane) and only later becomes part of the individual's own resources (the intrapsychological plane) [1]. For economics education this implies that professional language is acquired not by memorisation but

through active participation in real situations such as business negotiations, commercial disputes and presentations. Hymes argued that a speaker must master not only grammatical correctness but also appropriateness to context and culture [2].

Drawing on these sources, we understand oral competence as a unity of four interrelated components:

– **linguistic** – accurate use of economic terminology, grammatical structures and pronunciation norms;

– **pragmatic** – expressing speech acts (suggesting, objecting, reaching agreement) in line with the purpose and situation of communication;

– **sociocultural** – awareness of international business etiquette, cultural values and social norms;

– **strategic** – the ability to keep communication going when speech breaks down, vocabulary is lacking or misunderstanding arises, for example by rephrasing or asking for clarification.

1.2. Views on systems of exercises

Because exercises are central to developing speaking skills, we reviewed the main classifications proposed in the methodological literature. Ushinsky regarded the organisation of exercises into a system as the first and most important condition of their successful use. Leontyev stressed that an exercise should reach learners as a problem situation rather than as a mechanical procedure.

Many authors divide exercises into two groups: language and speech exercises (Ilyin, Rakhmanov), preparatory and speech exercises (Mirolyubov), analytical and synthetic exercises (Shubin), primary and speech exercises (Salistra), preparatory and communicative exercises (Salkin), and preparatory and personal-speech exercises (Klimentinko). Others prefer three-part schemes. Jalolov distinguishes formative, developing and perfecting exercises; Buxbinder, informational, operational and motivational ones; Shatilov, genuinely communicative, conditionally communicative and non-communicative (language) exercises. Lagay proposes receptive exercises (preparatory, analytical, imitative), reproductive exercises (synthetic, semi-constructive) and productive exercises (constructive, transformational).

Taken together, these views suggest that instruction should move step by step from preparatory exercises, which help learners master language material, to communicative exercises that require them to produce speech independently. The model and exercise system described below follow this logic.

To put the approach into practice we formulated six pedagogical principles (Table 1).

Table 1. Pedagogical principles for developing oral speech through a sociocultural approach

Principle	Content and practical realisation
Integration of cultural context	Every economic topic is taught together with national and international business culture, etiquette and norms of communication.
Communicativeness	Lessons aim to build real communicative competence rather than merely transmit knowledge.
Professional orientation (ESP)	Tasks and exercises are directly linked to economics, finance, management and marketing.
Interactivity	Dialogues, negotiations, simulations, debates and case studies serve as the main forms of learning.

Principle	Content and practical realisation
Pragmatic appropriateness	Learners adapt their speech to the situation, the interlocutor's goals and social status.
Intercultural sensitivity	Learners are taught to take social and cultural differences into account and to show tolerance in communication.

The course design also drew on Nation's Four Strands framework [7]. Accordingly, instruction kept four strands in balance: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development.

2. Methods

2.1. The methodological model

The study produced a holistic model for developing the spoken English of future economists. The model brings together educational aims, professional needs, course content and expected outcomes, and consists of four components.

Target component. Preparing economics students for international professional communication, improving their oral speech and building the ability to express ideas freely, coherently and in a culturally appropriate way.

Organisational component. Instruction is organised in six stages:

1) **diagnostic stage** – learners' speaking readiness, economic vocabulary and communicative potential are assessed;

2) **motivational stage** – the need to learn English is strengthened with situations and video materials drawn from international business practice;

3) **preparatory stage** – economic terminology, business phrases and intercultural norms are learned through vocabulary exercises and audio texts;

4) **practical-communicative stage** – language is used in role-plays, simulations and case studies on banking, investment, customer relations and business negotiations;

5) **integration stage** – economic content is combined with sociocultural norms to develop the ability to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds;

6) **final assessment stage** – results are evaluated against the established criteria.

Content component. Pair work, group work and individual study are combined with professionally oriented didactic conditions and innovative techniques (role-play, debate, case study), so that learners enter a realistic professional communication environment.

Outcome component. The effectiveness of the model is judged by fluency, grammatical and lexical accuracy, correct use of economic terminology and cultural appropriateness. The correspondence between components, stages, main tasks and assessed criteria is shown in Table 5 in the Appendix.

2.2. Experimental base and participants

The practical effectiveness of the methodology was tested in a pedagogical experiment carried out between 2024 and 2026 at three higher education institutions. In total, 487 first- and second-year economics students took part. To keep the comparison objective, they were divided into experimental groups (EG) and control groups (CG) (Table 2).

Table 2. Experimental sites and distribution of participants

Institution	Total students	Experimental (EG)	Control (CG)
Gulistan State University	195	98	97
Tashkent State Transport University	149	76	73

Institution	Total students	Experimental (EG)	Control (CG)
Samarkand State Technical University	143	72	71
Total	**487**	**246**	**241**

2.3. Assessment criteria and proficiency levels

Four criteria were developed to assess students' speaking objectively and comprehensively. Each was scored on a scale of 0–25, giving a maximum of 100 points:

– **Criterion 1. Fluency and coherence** – speaking without undue pauses and linking ideas logically and continuously;

– **Criterion 2. Economic vocabulary and grammar** – accurate and appropriate use of professional terminology and fixed financial and economic expressions;

– **Criterion 3. Sociocultural norms and communicative etiquette** – observing international business etiquette, taking the interlocutor's point of view into account and showing intercultural appropriateness;

– **Criterion 4. Sustaining interaction and responding** – reacting quickly to the interlocutor and keeping dialogic speech going.

On the basis of total scores, students were assigned to one of three levels:

– **high (86–100 points)** – communicates freely and fluently on economic topics, fully observes intercultural norms and uses terminology with pragmatic precision;

– **intermediate (56–85 points)** – hesitates or makes grammatical errors but can convey economic content and maintain the conversation;

– **low (0–55 points)** – has a limited vocabulary, meets serious obstacles in speech and shows a weak grasp of sociocultural norms and dialogue management.

2.4. Statistical analysis

The statistical significance of differences between the experimental and control groups was assessed with the non-parametric Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney U test [15]. The null hypothesis (H_0) stated that the groups' results did not differ significantly, that is, that the methodology had no appreciable effect. The alternative hypothesis (H_1) stated that a significant difference existed, that is, that the methodology was effective. The significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$, which gives a two-tailed critical value of $Z_{crit} = 1.96$. The empirical value was calculated as:

$$Z_{emp} = (U - \mu_U) / \sigma_U$$

To compare the growth and decline within the experimental groups, two relative indicators were used:

$$E = P_{final(high)} / P_{initial(high)}; \quad K = P_{initial(low)} / P_{final(low)}$$

where E shows how many times the share of high-level students increased and K shows how many times the share of low-level students decreased.

3. Results.

Results from the diagnostic and formative stages of the experiment were analysed in turn. At the start, the oral proficiency of the two sets of groups was almost identical (Table 3).

Table 3. Levels of spoken English among future economists at the beginning and end of the experiment

Stage	Group	Students	High (n)	High (%)	Interm. (n)	Interm. (%)	Low (n)	Low (%)
Start	EG	246	27	10.98	95	38.62	124	50.41
Start	CG	241	24	9.96	91	37.76	126	52.28

Stage	Group	Students	High (n)	High (%)	Interm. (n)	Interm. (%)	Low (n)	Low (%)
Start	Total	487	51	10.47	186	38.19	250	51.33
End	EG	246	76	30.89	133	54.07	37	15.04
End	CG	241	43	17.84	116	48.13	82	34.02
End	Total	487	119	24.44	249	51.13	119	24.44

EG – experimental groups; CG – control groups; Interm. – intermediate level.

At the beginning, high-level students made up 10.98% of the experimental groups (27 students) and 9.96% of the control groups (24 students). Low-level students accounted for 50.41% (124) and 52.28% (126) respectively. The empirical value computed from these figures was $Z_{emp} = 0.82$. Because it is below the critical value ($0.82 < 1.96$), the initial difference was judged statistically insignificant: the groups started from comparable positions.

During the formative stage, the experimental groups worked with the sociocultural model, interactive role-plays, business simulations and case studies on a regular basis. By the end, high-level students reached 30.89% (76 students) and low-level students fell to 15.04% (37 students). The control groups improved as well, with 17.84% at the high level and 34.02% at the low level, but the change was much smaller. The share of high-level students rose by 19.91 percentage points in the experimental groups against 7.88 in the control groups, and the share of low-level students dropped by 35.37 and 18.26 percentage points respectively.

3.1. Dynamics by criterion

Mean scores for each criterion are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean scores by assessment criterion (each criterion scored out of 25)

Criterion	EG before	EG after	EG gain	CG before	CG after	CG gain
1. Fluency and coherence	10.4	18.2	+7.8	10.2	14.1	+3.9
2. Economic vocabulary and grammar	9.8	17.5	+7.7	10.0	13.8	+3.8
3. Sociocultural norms	8.9	16.9	+8.0	9.1	12.5	+3.4
4. Sustaining interaction	9.5	18.0	+8.5	9.3	13.2	+3.9
Total (out of 100)	38.6	70.6	+32.0	38.6	53.6	+15.0

Gains are the differences between final and initial scores.

The experimental groups gained between 7.7 and 8.5 points on each criterion, whereas the control groups gained between 3.4 and 3.9. Final scores in the experimental groups were highest for fluency (18.2) and for sustaining interaction (18.0). The largest gains, however, were recorded for sustaining interaction (8.5 points) and sociocultural norms (8.0 points). Sociocultural norms started as the weakest criterion in both sets of groups (8.9 and 9.1 points); in the experimental groups the score climbed to 16.9, while in the control groups it stopped at 12.5. The total score rose from 38.6 to 70.6 in the experimental groups and from 38.6 to 53.6 in the control groups. These figures indicate that hesitation decreased and that the simulation tasks helped students develop the ability to respond quickly.

3.2. Testing the statistical hypothesis and effectiveness indicators

At the end of the experiment, the Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney U test gave an empirical value of $Z_{emp} = 3.94$. This exceeds the critical value ($Z_{crit} = 1.96$ at $\alpha = 0.05$), so H_0 was rejected and H_1

accepted. The difference between the groups at the end of the study is therefore statistically significant and can be attributed to the methodology rather than to chance.

For the experimental groups the relative indicators were as follows:

– growth coefficient for the high level: E = 30.89 / 10.98 ≈ 2.81 (an absolute increase of 19.91 percentage points);

– reduction coefficient for the low level: K = 50.41 / 15.04 ≈ 3.35 (an absolute decrease of 35.37 percentage points).

In other words, the share of low-level students shrank by a factor of about 3.4, while the share of high-level students grew by a factor of nearly 2.8. This points to considerable pedagogical and practical potential in the model.

4. Discussion

The results support the idea of developing future economists' spoken English through a sociocultural approach, both in theory and in methodological practice. We discuss them from three angles.

First, traditional teaching tends to concentrate on grammatical accuracy and the translation of economic texts. In this study, sociocultural context and pragmatic appropriateness came first. The experiment showed that a student who knows grammar perfectly but does not understand international business etiquette and social norms may still suffer pragmatic failure in real communication. The principles of intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic appropriateness built into the model were meant to fill this gap, and the rise in the sociocultural norms criterion, from 8.9 to 16.9 points, is consistent with that aim.

Second, the gains in the experimental groups on all four criteria, fluency (from 10.4 to 18.2 points) in particular, are most plausibly linked to the role-plays, case studies, business debates and simulations used in teaching. Such tasks appear to have reduced speaking anxiety and moved practice away from artificial drills towards activity that resembles real professional communication. This agrees with the views summarised above: when an exercise is presented as a problem situation and the exercise system grows gradually more demanding, learners move from mechanical repetition to expressing their own ideas.

Third, the reliability of the findings rests on two things: a sample of 487 students drawn from three major universities (GulDU, TDTU and SamDTU), and a rigorous statistical tool, the Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney U test. The groups were comparable at the start ($Z_{emp} = 0.82 < 1.96$) and clearly different at the end ($Z_{emp} = 3.94 > 1.96$), which indicates that the observed change was not accidental.

Some limitations should be noted. The study was conducted at three institutions, so testing the methodology in other regions and fields of study would show more precisely how far it can be generalised.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study of developing economics students' spoken English through a sociocultural approach leads to the following conclusions:

1) A sociocultural approach has been shown, in theory and in practice, to be an effective pedagogical and methodological basis for developing future economists' oral communicative competence in English. Teaching language units together with their social, cultural and professional context fosters pragmatic and intercultural appropriateness.

2) Oral competence develops through the integration of linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural and strategic components. A model made up of target, organisational, content and outcome components made it possible to organise instruction in six consecutive stages.

3) The experiment with 487 students and the results of the Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney U test ($Z_{emp} = 3.94 > 1.96$) confirmed the high effectiveness of the proposed methodology. In the

experimental groups, the share of high-level students grew by a factor of 2.81 and the share of low-level students fell by a factor of 3.35.

5.1. Practical recommendations

– **Use authentic and interactive resources.** Go beyond traditional texts and make regular use of authentic video and audio materials, podcasts, case studies, debates and simulations that reflect real economic situations.

– **Update assessment criteria.** Do not judge speaking by grammatical accuracy alone; include fluency, pragmatic appropriateness, intercultural appropriateness and the ability to sustain interaction.

– **Support teachers.** Offer foreign language teachers training and seminars on sociocultural and interactive teaching, and extend the findings to other non-philological fields.

Appendix

Table 5. Components of the methodological model and the corresponding lesson formats

Model component	Stage	Main tasks and methods	Criterion assessed
Target	Diagnostic	Initial interview, questionnaire, monologue and dialogue assessment tasks	Initial level of readiness
Organisational and content	Motivational and preparatory	Analysis of business videos, vocabulary and terminology exercises, audio texts, short presentations	Criterion 2 (vocabulary and grammar)
Organisational and content	Practical-communicative	Role-play, case study, business negotiations and debates on banking and investment	Criterion 1 (fluency), Criterion 4 (interaction)
Organisational and content	Integration	Simulation of intercultural business etiquette, resolution of international commercial disputes	Criterion 3 (sociocultural norms)
Outcome	Final assessment	Comprehensive oral examination, presentation and statistical analysis (Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney)	All four criteria and dynamics of growth

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