

THE USE OF ICT AS A DIDACTIC TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: The presented research introduces an approach to foreign language learning that integrates Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) with a clear didactic tool in a sociocultural context. In this study, the foreign language learner will be regarded in terms of Experiential Learning Theory and Sociocultural Theory. As a basis for studying foreign languages, one specific key feature will be considered. The suggestion that the sociocultural identity to which the natives belong is crucial. This suggestion could serve as a keystone when an individual needs to learn any foreign language. The learner's cognitive perceptions depend on the accumulated patterns shaped by the sociocultural context. The stated assertion is based on the assumption that the mental perception model is strongly connected to the learner's cultural identity. This assertion plays a key role in the paper. As pedagogy proposes, the basic required set of language skills consists of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The aforementioned skill set could be effectively formed by placing the learner into a digital representation of the foreign language cultural environment. Information and Communication Technologies should be used to create a specific sociocultural context or virtualized space for the purpose of language learning. The conceptual model for virtualizing the learning process will be presented. In such an approach, a formalization of the model will be required.

KEYWORDS: Foreign language, language learning, ICT, didactic tool, learning process, sociocultural identity

1. Introduction

The human world consists of various dynamic layers that reflect knowledge, beliefs, understandings, and even social contradictions. Despite the abundance of definitions in the scientific domain (Boroch, 2018), a short formulation of this complex intangible structure could be referred to as human culture. As a result of human evolution there are varieties of manifestations of that culture. Following the analysis of cultural characteristics, certain factors can be considered specific. One of it could be defined as language, lying in the layer of the specific context. Historically, these layers have been formed at the geographically different locations. In his willing to understand certain unknown culture outside of its own, the human uses basic approaches for interpretation of information, accessed through communication between individuals. The basic method of communication is a verbal process. To achieve the main goal of interpreting information acquired through verbal communication, understanding foreign cultures plays a key role.

This circumstance involves the, teaching process and education. Modern education offers various approaches to teaching a foreign language using a variety of pedagogical and didactic technologies and methods. This article considers an actual and effective way of learning a foreign language by immersing the student in the culture and social aspects of the studied language, which in the modern world is possible not only by means of personal travel to the country of the studied language, but also in a wide range of digital forms. The formation of sociocultural competence is inseparably connected with the main goals of education: *practical*, *developmental* and *educational*. Developing a sociocultural environment through ICT is challenging, as it requires the combined efforts of pedagogical specialists and engineers.

As suggested above, sociocultural competence plays an important role in the teaching process. As such it implies knowledge of social and cultural features of native speakers, their traditions and habits, norms of behavior and etiquette, as well as the ability to understand and adequately use them in the process of communication, while remaining a native speaker of another culture. The sociocultural and historical aspect in teaching foreign languages is aimed at introducing and using cultural authentic material in the content of teaching, introducing the learner to the culture of the country and its sociocultural context of the target language, helping them to understand the peculiarities of the culture

of this country and developing their skills of implementing this material through the means of the foreign language.

The use of sociocultural approach in learning a foreign language allows revealing the main components of the concept of the level of functional sociocultural literacy of a student. Sociocultural competence can be achieved by using various sources of sociocultural information, such as foreign-language literature, mass media, movies, direct communication with native speakers or with the use of remote communication means and social networks. In addition, training in the country of the target language can benefit the development of the learner's sociocultural competence. But often, economic reasons appear to be the main obstacles to this. To overcome this, ICT could serve as a solution.

When reviewing the process of teaching a foreign language, the most relevant didactic approach is the communicative approach. This approach requires connection with the designation of a new purpose of teaching, where language acquisition was considered as means of communication, communication and interaction in *intercultural space*. Such *space* could be built through the sociocultural context of the studied language with placing the students in it. This could be effectively accomplished through the creation of a virtual space.

In this sense, in the exposed paper, the statement “*sociocultural context learning*” is augmented by the contemporary tools such as Information and Communication Technologies. The aim of the paper is to present a conceptual model of virtualized foreign language learning environment, intended for use in the development process of an educational domain.

2. Literature review

There is common accepted understanding of existing of strong relation between culture and language. In the field of the foreign language learning or teaching, researchers suggest this relation between culture and language (Brown, 2014; Bui, 2022; Chunpeng & Wibowo, 2022; Moeller & Catalano, 2015; Meirovitz & Zur, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2004; Boonmoh & Jumpakate, 2023; Salehi & Salehi, 2012; Bartosh et al., 2023). A key foundational artifact in the context of language and culture is sociocultural competence, which is discussed in numerous studies (Bennett, 2023, Byram, 1997, Hofstede et al., 2010, Kramsch, 1998, Lado, 1971), and with the continuation in contemporary research (Chenchieh, 2022), affirming the thesis that intercultural communication may occur between languages and between cultures.

Among fundamental learning theories is *Sociocultural Theory*, originated by Lev Vygotsky, which emphasizes that social involvement is “integral to cognitive growth” (Songet al, 2023). Such a sociocultural theory can be regarded as the foundation of a specific sociocultural conceptual model within the digital learning process, incorporating core of the social constructivism. Support for this could be found through the statement “*social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cooperative learning in constructing both cognitive and emotional images of reality*” (Brown, 2006, p. 23). Assumption of the technology usage in the contemporary learning process is in natural relation with the didactic approach of the teacher.

Basically, in the methodology of teaching a foreign language the terms speaking and communication have different definitions. Speaking includes a perceptual link, both communicative and interactive. Consequently, the concept of communication is broad and encompasses the transfer of information of both cognitive and affective-evaluative nature, as well as the exchange of knowledge, skills, and abilities in the process of verbal interaction between two or more people. (Tinyakova, 2011).

It should be noted that in education, interaction involves the collaborative exchange of elements such as thoughts, feelings, and ideas between individuals (Brown, 2001, p. 259). In this context, the foreign language learning process inherently involves the use of phrases and expressions. However, understanding mutual influence and information exchange does not necessarily occur in every instance of the learning process. This is due to a lack of communicative competence, which researchers of the communicative approach regard as the primary goal of the foreign language learning.

One effective approach to fostering communication is to enrich the teaching environment through ICT or to virtualize it, ergo to add a virtualized communication environment. Such steps could be found in specialized literature discussing on the concept learning levels, creating “digital spaces, operating alongside traditional curricular spaces or on a stand-alone basis” (Carthy, 2019). Moreover, the relevance of the “digital space” concept is undeniable, stating that “language and technology

experts” should be organized for the creation of a new form of “virtual space” for studying languages” (Carthy, 2019; Song et al., 2023).

The keystone in this study is the usage of the ICTs in foreign language learning in the following directions:

- ICTs as a building tool for culture-inherited environment;
- ICTs as knowledge providing mechanism;
- Evolving speaking and communication;
- ICTs as mechanism for learning style implementation.

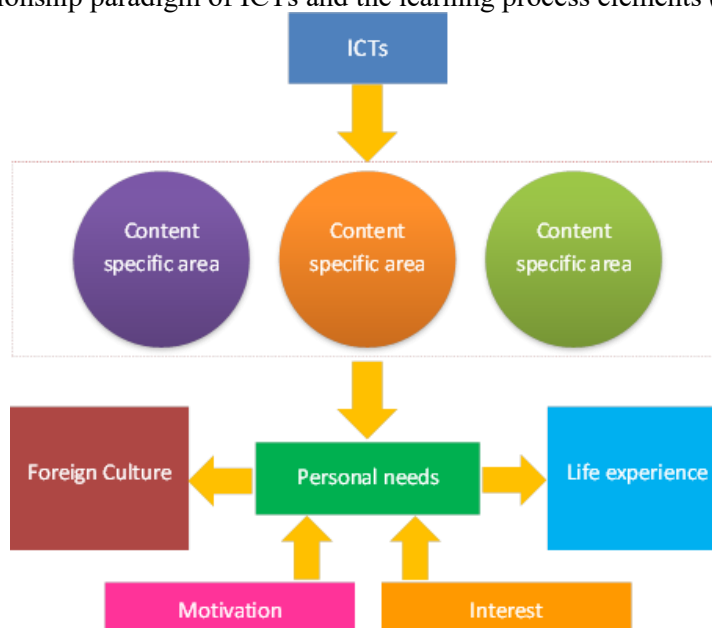
There is a rapid diffusion of technology in the lecture rooms, including language teaching and learning, placing it at the important position (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011). In such a way the usage of ICTs encompasses the whole set of required language skills consisting of listening, reading, speaking and writing (Bui, 2022). The involvement of technologically advanced approaches and an integrated pedagogical model provides learners with an “unparalleled language acquisition experience” (Song, et al, 2023).

This process of introducing innovation should be carefully technologically evolved. It is worth noting that there is strong dominance of digital technologies usage for teacher-centered purposes as they are considered instructional tools (Bui, 2022). In addition, it is important to notice that the usage of ICTs affects positively the learning process by increasing learner's motivation and interest in learning (Bui, 2022; Bartosh et al., 2023). As stated in (Chunpeng & Wibowo, 2022), the fundamental motivation for the learners appears to be “to immerse themselves” in a foreign culture, alongside widening their worldviews and enrich their life experiences. Assuming the above, it would be possible to construct a relationship paradigm of ICTs and the learning process elements. (Fig.1.).

Another crucial factor is the perception models of contemporary learners, determined as a highly interactive generation (*socially defined community, placed in a fully interactive technological environment in which the individual creates, perceives, processes and provides information through digital technologies*) (Atanasov, Ivanova, 2022, p.13). These perception models demand the teacher's approaches to be aligned with the sociocultural level of the learners. This means a form of adapted teaching.

In addition, it is still a valid circumstance in detection of *dystechnia* in the foreign language teachers (Bui, 2022) noted as an issue of adopting digital technologies in the classroom and limited competency and experiences with using those technologies.

Figure.1. Relationship paradigm of ICTs and the learning process elements (Atanasov).



Given these factors, discussed above, in this research the key features of the sociocultural competence in the teaching foreign language process will be regarded. The sociocultural approach will be presented as a theoretical base for its digital transformation.

To implement such a language teaching approach via digital technology a sociocultural educational paradigm of foreign language learning in context of sociocultural space, simulated through the ICTs, will be presented.

3. Main thesis

Features of the sociocultural competence

Sociocultural competence implies knowledge of social and cultural features of native speakers, their traditions and habits, norms of behavior and etiquette, as well as the ability to understand and adequately use them in the process of communication, while remaining a native speaker of another culture. The sociocultural aspect in teaching foreign languages is aimed at introducing and using cultural authentic material in the content of teaching, introducing the learner to the culture of the country of the target language, helping them to understand the peculiarities of the culture of this country and developing their skills of implementing this material through the means of the foreign language.

The sociocultural approach in foreign language teaching contributes to the formation and development of the necessary qualities in the learners:

- Cultural tolerance and sociocultural observation;
- Readiness to communicate and co-operate with people in another cultural environment;
- Appropriate speech etiquette, sociocultural tact and politeness;

The formation, development and use of these skills of sociocultural competence helps:

- Develop the ability to orientate in various sociocultural aspects of life and activities of people in the country of the studied language;
- Develop the skills and abilities to find solutions to questions and ways out of situations of communicative misunderstanding due to social and cultural problems in communication;
- Adapt to communication in a foreign language environment, give understanding of the necessity to follow traditions, etiquette, rules and norms of behavior and politeness in the country of the studied language;
- Present the basics of representing native culture in a foreign social and cultural environment.

The sociocultural approach provides learning a foreign language in close connection with the foreign language culture; therefore, together with the communicative and personalized approaches it is extremely necessary to use and integrate the sociocultural approach. A parallel use of these approaches in teaching is an effective way, which allows obtaining better results. The effective use of sociocultural language knowledge in foreign language communication means that the foreign language speaker has sufficient sociocultural competence.

Sociocultural linguistic competence, as a subfeature, is sociocultural linguistic knowledge, alongside with the intercultural communication skills. The lack of such competences or incorrect use of them significantly hampers understanding and interaction. Sociocultural and intercultural competence implies the adequacy of communication with native speakers of the target language, as well as the possession of certain country and cultural knowledge, along with the knowledge of basic linguistic units with national and cultural semantics. Ignorance or misunderstanding of the social and cultural context in which the foreign language functions leads to cultural interference and complicates the process of communication.

The concept of the Council of Europe assumes (North & Goodier, 2018) that the sociocultural approach is a necessity for the formation of a valuable and responsible attitude of a person to the surrounding world, and is also the basis for entering and assimilating into culture. The formation and organization of such an educational process and educational environment allows the formation of a personality in the context of universal culture, taking into account certain cultural conditions of a person's life; education is defined on the level of modern world culture; interaction is supposed to be established in the context of the world culture.

The intercultural approach in foreign language learning is based on the doctrine of human values and carries an objective connection of a person with culture as a system of values.

The sociocultural aspect of foreign language pedagogy and teaching methodology is based on pedagogical reflections derived from an accurate analysis of the student's perspective, research into the factors of the student's life experience, learning traditions and habits, knowledge of the world, the correlation of source and target cultures, individual motivation and success in learning, institutional

conditions (*time and place of lessons, status of foreign language subjects, equipment with technical means, qualification of teachers, the student's surroundings and the language environment that has developed during the time of the student's learning, etc.*). It develops extremely effectively where there is social and cultural foreign language integration, pronounced geographical and cultural or territorial remoteness, as well as other social and sociocultural relations that correlate with the country of the target language.

Intercultural and sociocultural learning presupposes that utterances must be understood against the background of another foreign language culture. Exposure to different forms of foreign culture very often involves making one's own world more understandable through feedback, as well as feedback on one's own experiences and socialization processes. In this way, learners become more sensitive to the behavior and reactions of people from another cultural space, which contributes to the development of empathy, which helps to enter into social interaction with representatives of other cultures, to overcome both the language barrier and fear and hesitation in another foreign-language culture and environment.

Sociocultural development in the context of learning a foreign language contributes to:

- Understanding of the relationship between established patterns of behavior and traditions, values and attitudes inherent in the culture of the target language;
- Understanding of the relationship between ideology and the products of material and spiritual culture of the country of the language learnt;
- Realizing the role of the native language and culture in the development of universal culture;
- Formation of an analytical approach to the study of foreign culture in comparison with the culture of one's own country;
- Development of linguistic culture of describing the realities of the country of the learnt language;
- Formation of an evaluative-emotional attitude to the world.

Mastering this language strategy is a complex process of establishing and developing contacts between representatives of different cultures with the needs of joint activities, including not only the exchange of information, but also the development of a common strategy of interaction, perception and understanding of the other person in terms of its social and cultural aspects, which contributes to the creation and maintenance of mutual respectful communicative contact.

There is an English proverb that precisely describes the core role of the above-mentioned strategy of cultural and social interaction: *“A foreign language is more easily learned in the kitchen than at school”*. This implies a *language immersion* method that makes learning a foreign language, for example English, enjoyable and results tangible in a short period of time. This would be effectively achieved via ICT. Thus, the method of language immersion appeared, when a teacher teaches or gives instructions in a foreign (non-native) language or students travel to the country of the language learnt. As a result, the foreign language begins to be perceived as a mother tongue.

The main advantages of the language immersion method (Wilkinson, 1998):

- Speaking skills are improved, which is the most important goal in learning any language. Vocabulary will increase at an astronomical rate.
- Break the language barrier. The immersion method completely immerses you in a language environment where, regardless of your desire, there is a vital need to speak. If you are studying with a teacher, insist that the instruction is entire in English.
- Listening comprehension and overall listening skills improve. By immersing yourself in a language environment, you not only learn to speak, but to perceive a live spoken foreign language. Accents, slang, idioms in speech will no longer scare you, especially if you are studying with a native speaker or are in the country of the language you are learning.
- Additionally, the improvement of memory and your cognitive abilities will not be long in coming, as the brain of a person who finds himself in unfamiliar conditions and situations begins to work more efficiently, in an enhanced mode, thus creating new neural connections that will not only help in learning a foreign language, but will postpone old age.

Despite the huge amount of positive feedback from both teachers and learners, the language immersion method has some obvious disadvantages:

- This method is not suitable for many beginners to foreign language learning, it should be taken into account that this does not apply to children. When deciding to learn a language by immersion, it is advisable that you have a low level of language proficiency. Knowing only a few words of foreign

language (English) will make it very difficult to be in an English-speaking community, personal and social discomfort, as well as the motivation and desire to continue learning may be completely lost, leading to unfortunate consequences and total discomfort;

- This technology is also not suitable for those who want to learn a language very quickly. One week or a few days is absolutely not enough to master the language;

- For people in an unstable psychological state, this method may also be contraindicated, as it may lead to psychological discomfort, as it will not be possible to use the native language. After some time of adaptation, it will become more comfortable, but at first it will be difficult. Also, there is a possibility of misunderstanding something or not understanding it at all. You have to look for ways out of the situation yourself, which leads to emotional and psychological discomfort. Such troubles most often happen to beginners;

- The high cost of this method implies the cost of accommodation and training in the country, as well as additional accompanying transport and other expenses, which is often unaffordable for most learners.

Based on the concept of sociocultural competence, it is possible to identify important components that are aimed at the application and use of a set of knowledge, skills and abilities in students, which gives immersion methodology in learning a foreign language.

Successful development of these competences requires a comprehensive approach and knowledge of its main components: *informational*, *value*, *conceptual*, *orientation*, *operational* and *predictive*. Each of them should be considered in more detail.

The *informational* component includes sociocultural knowledge that emphasizes the necessity of forming a permanent cognitive interest, which is formed in students only under the condition of a certain organization of the learning process by the teacher. The *value* component is a mandatory independence in evaluative judgements, as well as socially significant principles and attitudes in the context of life self-determination. *Conceptual* component is a set of opinions, views, principles, beliefs, characterizing the attitude to the surrounding world and its realities, thus forming one's own vision of the world as a whole and a person's place in this world. The *orientation* component demonstrates intellectual comprehension of the received sociocultural knowledge, as well as the necessity to understand one's own life resources, skills, peculiarities, abilities, including adequate self-assessment and the received experience of reflexive activity. As for the *operational* component, it shows the readiness and skill of applying knowledge, principles and assessments in various situations of sociocultural activity. The *predictive* component, in its turn, is responsible for the ability to use knowledge and values as well as one's own worldview to predict the safest possible consequences when applying a foreign language in the situation of being in the country of the target language or modulating such conditions.

Sociocultural model of educational virtualization

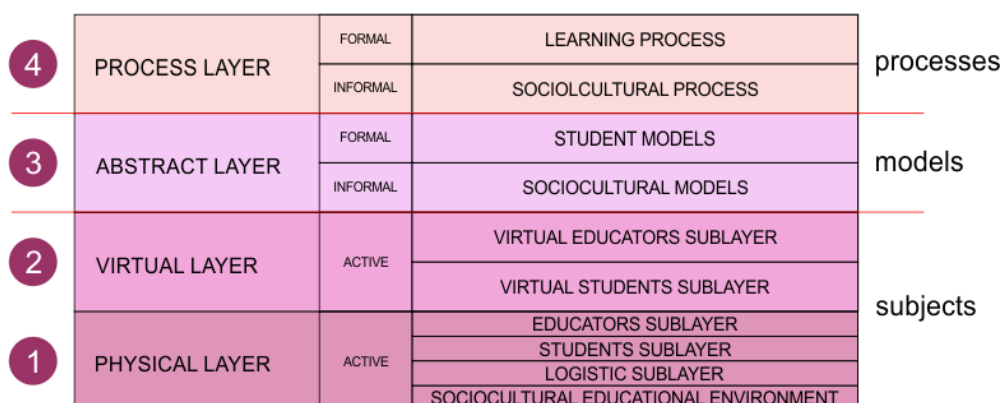
Looking at the modern learning process, one can note its high-tech feature. A major impact in the process of forming such a technological feature has digital transformation in the educational field. But there should be didactic model integration for gaining the education goal in the learning process. (Atanasov, 2019; Bui, 2022).

As far as in this paper the experience of the learner will be regarded as a key factor, an Experimental learning theory (Kolb et al., 2001) and Sociocultural Theory (Song et al, 2023) should be taken into account.

Thus, the central role of that learner's experience and sociocultural context in the learning process should be emphasized. One of the main tasks in this process would be to find the way this approach to be implemented. In order to achieve such didactic integration via digital transformation of the classic learning process, a *sociocultural model of educational virtualization* should be applied (Figure 2.). There is a term which can be applied to the digital learner - avatar, but as long as it has a very broad meaning, the term *digital learner* takes basic place here.

The model presented below is based on the educational paradigm adapted from (Atanasov, 2019, p.192).

Figure 2. Sociocultural model of educational virtualization (Atanasov, 2019)



There are certain points in this paradigm to be regarded:

- ICTs should be used for simulation (virtualization) of sociocultural learning environment of specific context of sociocultural space matched to culture identity of the foreign language native speakers;

- There should be no restrictions on the use of a specific technology, as long as it aligns with the main pedagogical goals and complies with regulatory requirements for an educational process.

As depicted above, the main feature of the model is its layer structure with specific purposes and logic ranges. For example, the sociocultural context should be based on a sociocultural model. Each of them has informal traits, which is logical given the non-formative structure of certain social societies. But for the student's model, strict norms should be followed.

Since a virtualization of learning process is proposed here, below is given a formalization of it adopted by (Atanasov, 2019). In order to ensure the “active” status of each participant in the learning process, each learner should have its own digital subject. This could provide an opportunity to the learner to:

- interact with other digital learners;
- read words or texts in the generated virtual cultural context;
- listen to virtual speakers or synthesized voices in certain scene;
- write words or sentences in certain scene;
- speak to a virtual collaborator or group;
- explore the virtualized objects presenting a virtual sociocultural environment.

All these virtual actions – *interacting, reading, listening, writing, and speaking* have fundamental learning traits (Bui, 2022) and are complemented by the ability to *explore* a virtualized foreign language cultural space. In such interaction a teacher should be involved as well.

To synthesize a model, a formalization is needed as a first step. The process of formalization below follows an approach presented in (Atanasov, 2019).

If s_i represents i^{th} instance of virtual foreign language student (digital learner) from the set $S_{foreignLanguage}$ of all registered language learning students then:

$$s_i \in S_{foreignLanguage} = \{s_1, s_2, \dots, s_n\}, \text{ where } 0 < n \leq MaxNumber_{system}$$

Here $MaxNumber_{system}$ should be variable depending on two key factors:

- Pedagogical goal of the teacher aiming to gain optimal effectiveness of the language learning process. This mean teacher should set an optimal number of virtual students in every didactic scenario;
- System capability satisfying teacher's demand.

Let e is an instance of *virtual sociocultural context* from set E of all enabled sociocultural contexts so $e \in E$.

And let $s_i \rightarrow e$. And let e'_j represents specific *virtual sociocultural context* with learner's characteristics. Then here is logic description for virtual learning process if $e'_j \in E$

so, if $\forall e'_j \in E(e: e'_j)$ is true then
 this led to $s_i \rightarrow e'_j$

The above assures satisfaction of requirements of the certain learning style (experience) of each digital learner. Thus, for every digital learner a specific generated *virtual sociocultural context* e_j' with specific characteristic of that digital learner should be implicated.

In other words, any digital learner will be placed in virtual sociocultural context (virtual scene) with the ability to perform actions that result in measured cognitive load. In addition, the digital implication of personalizing of the real individual will be applied. The whole process should follow a clear and predefined pedagogical goal.

The proposition above could be described as functional dependency of didactic approach via ICT but with clear intention achieving authentic teaching settings to replace technological *how* with the pedagogical *why*. As far as all participants have an “active” feature, this means that interaction in the *virtual sociocultural context* should be the main toolkit. By this, learners could be able, for example, to perform a variety of learning tasks - to transform the sentences or speeches, rearrange the studied phenomena in the sentences or speeches in various ways and through diverse modal channels, to verbal responding, etc.

4. Conclusion

The formation of key social and intercultural knowledge, skills, abilities and capabilities, which indicate the ability for an intercultural communication at an adequate level, cannot take place effectively and qualitatively without the application of the sociocultural approach in foreign language learning. Thus, this article proposes a conception model for virtualizing the learning process based on the basic concepts of the sociocultural and intercultural approach. The model defines and presents important structural components for successful implementation and formation of sociocultural competence, and introduces some obvious advantages and disadvantages of applying the two keystone learning theories. In addition, the immersion methodology in foreign language learning is chosen.

The presented model is currently theoretical, and empirical data must be collected to enable in-depth analysis and further assessment of its applicability and effectiveness in classroom settings. As far as formalization is involved, such formal logic could serve as a model for development process of the digital learning app.

In order to utilize the proposed here mathematical formula for enhancing sociocultural aspects of foreign language teaching and learning, an interdisciplinary team of philologists, educators, and engineers should be formed to develop a prototype of the proposed model.

Future directions for work include the development of a virtual environment (surroundings) with the possibility of defining sociocultural characteristics typical of a given language group.

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