

## Creating the English-Medium Learning Environment in Middle Schools

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### Abstract

The paper deals with the idea of creating the English-medium learning environment in middle schools as means of improving students' English language command via learning motivation throughout their school years. The analysis is based on the research into learning environment by Russian and international scholars on the issue. The empirical part of the research is based on the analysis and interpretation of best teaching practices of some schools in the Republic of Tatarstan, which have successfully introduced English-medium learning environment in their institutions. The leading approach used by the authors is observation and classification of investigated material, interviewing, collecting, analyzing and synthesizing the data, received via interviews with teachers and school administration. The authors come to the conclusion that English-medium learning environment allows to successfully maintain to sufficiently improve school students' foreign language command and nurture learning motivation. The materials of the research may be applied by researchers and teaching staff who are interested in creating English-speaking academic environment in their educational institutions.

**Keywords:** School student; Teacher; English-medium learning environment.



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### 1. Introduction

In the rapidly changing modern multicultural world, English is commonly defined as a language of international communication, what increases the importance of productive English language learning in middle schools. For many years, the state-maintained schools of the Republic of Tatarstan, which is situated in the Volga Region of the Russian Federation, offered its students two native (Russian and Tatar) and one foreign language. Currently due to political and social changes only Russian as a native language is obligatory to study and a number of Russian classes per week have been increased. Unfortunately, the amount of English classes remains the same, despite the fact that the current amount of them is insufficient for productive English language learning (Bobyreva and Latypov, 2015).

However, the language policy in Tatarstan provides for the improvement of the quality of foreign language education at all stages; providing for the needs of society in learning foreign languages; rising the pupils' educational competence in foreign-language education according to modern requirements of the international standards accepted by the Council of Europe; development of language pluralism; preservation and development of variability of general education institutions and models of training in foreign languages; updating the content of foreign language education; new teaching techniques, including the interactive ones and multimedia; integration and complexity; introduction interdisciplinary and integrative culture studies courses; openness of certification procedures (Evans and Morrison, 2017).

Teaching foreign languages within the system of general education is carried out in more than 2200 schools of the Republic of Tatarstan where over 350 thousand pupils study. To solve the problem of updating the contents and improve the quality of foreign language education in Tatarstan schools and higher educational establishments a new format is offered: integration of a foreign language with other subjects with the view of strengthening innovative sociocultural aspect of foreign language education and others, thus creating effective English-medium learning environment both at school and university. The issue of English-medium instruction at higher educational institutions has gained a universal acclaim and has been studied by a number of Russian and international researchers, however, at middle schools it still remains a challengeable though highly demanded concept which requires greater attention (Guzikova, 2016).

## 2. Methodological Framework

### 2.1. Background

Before shifting to the methods of English-medium learning environment some terms are to be clarified: The Russian psychologist (Nemov, 1995) describes the environment as a complex of external conditions, objects and factors, among which the person is born, lives and develops. In terms of educational environment the authors are inclined to follow Russian researchers (Manan et al., 2017) and some other scientists and to define the learning environment as a complex of material factors, social components and interpersonal relationships. The definition above and some others are based on the long-term history of research on the learning environment. The first attempts to conceptualize the environment's influence on person were accomplished by the Ancient Greek. In the XVII-XVIII

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centuries British and French scientists (J. Locke; D. Diderot) stated that environmental influence should be accepted as a forming factor of personality. However, scientists of that historical period believed that environment is a permanent factor, what is opposite to the modern point of view. According to [Rousseau \(1981\)](#), environment is the key factor for personality's successful self-development ([Manan et al., 2017](#)).

As regards Russia, the issue of learning environment was actualized twice: at the beginning of the XX century, with the Educational Reform of 1917, which led to the development of labor education, aimed to prepare students for the life-long work for the benefit of the country; and in 1990-s, when the majority of research into the problem was conducted. Currently, one of the established Russian scientists, ([Yasvin, 2001](#)) distinguishes four types of learning environment;

- Dogmatic learning environment, oriented to form a passive and dependent personality, the most widespread type;
- Quiet learning environment, aimed to form an independent, but passive personality, inclined to stay in the comfort zone;
- Career learning environment, oriented to form an active and depend personality, which can easily adopt to any kind of relationship in modern society;
- Creative educational environment, aimed at building a free and active personality to provide for the future successful self-development of a student.

Among the mentioned the authors see a creative educational environment as the best type of environment for English language learning. Environment, as an integral part of an individual's everyday life, is a significant factors of natural learning process. That is why the authors consider the English-medium learning environment a relevant problem for the educational system of modern Russia. However, the definitions above do not allow the authors to propose particular methods of creating the English-medium learning environment, which provide for generating the structure of learning environment. The latter is supposed to include the following components:

- Spatially-subject component (facilities, lodgement, materials);
- Social component (interpersonal relationship between students, teachers and parents)
- Activity component (definition of roles, content and teaching methods).

The authors believe that only all three mentioned components' realization can lead to a productive English-based learning environment.

## 2.2. The Status of the Problem

Taking into account the mentioned above and the fact that a modern person is supposed to be involved in global community, several schools in Tatarstan among dozens of others in the RF decide to improve the knowledge of English of their students via utilization of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), implementation of English into social activities and etc., in order to create a comprehensive English-medium learning environment. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, quoted worldwide, CLIL is a teaching method that involves teaching students about a subject in a foreign language. So CLIL considers the study of a foreign language as a tool for studying other subjects and spheres of life, thus, students gain a great learning motivation. Regarding learning a foreign language, the scientists distinguish two types of motivation - instrumental and integrative ([Gardner, 2012](#)). Instrumental (extrinsic) motivation reflects external requirements. The purpose of learning a foreign language is not a personal desire of students, but a necessity from the outer world.

Integrative (intrinsic) motivation reflects the internal needs and indicates students' desire to identify themselves with the culture of the country whose foreign language they learn. Thus, with integrative motivation, the purpose of learning a foreign language is the students' inner need. Researchers believe that integrative motivation is correlated to better success in a foreign language. In class the teacher indirectly influences the motivational sphere; thereby he/she can nourish or discourage students' thirst for knowledge. What is more, without the cognitive interest, it is impossible to develop positive attitude to the educational process. The appropriate learning motivation is one of the most important conditions for high-quality specialist training. Only with reasonable combination of integrative and instrumental motivation the successful foreign language studying is possible. Taking the above mentioned some schools in the Republic of Tatarstan have made a successful attempt to create a well-structured English-medium learning environment thus improving students' learning motivation ([Villalobos, 2009](#)).

## 3. Materials and Methods

The methods used in the present paper should be diversified into several stages of research. Such theoretical methods as search and analysis of materials dedicated to the problem of learning environment were used to accumulate the theoretical base of the research and to clarify some terms and classifications. In addition, the authors were to accumulate the best practices of the schools of the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia which have successfully implemented the English-medium learning environment into their educational process. As for empirical methods, educational process supervision, interviews with students and teachers were utilized, the contents of the applied English language student's textbooks and teacher's books were analyzed. All the products of the research were to be described and classified, according to [Panov \(2006\)](#) structure of the learning environment.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Here the authors are to describe various methods of English-medium learning environment creation based on the empirical research into some of the most effective schools of the region. Notable, modern schools are tend to

implement a creative English-medium learning environment, which is considered by the authors the most effective type of learning environment, because it is aimed to develop soft skills – skills that will be greatly sought in the future.

The first component of English-medium learning environment is spatially-subject component, which is revealed in facilities, lodgement, materials and etc (Mukanbetkaliyev et al., 2018).

Modern schools in the Republic of Tatarstan are well equipped with such facilities as smart boards, projectors, laptops and other digital appliances, which broaden the amount of techniques, used during the class time. However, the authors identify study packs as the most significant factor for English language learning. Obviously, any licensed and accredited school is supposed to use study packs, recommended by The Russian Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, these packs are hardly sufficient for the successful maintenance of the English-medium learning environment. That is why some additional study packs are used, mainly, British ones. They are English Word, Speak Out and others, which provide not just a real language, but a relevant background knowledge in addition (Sopykhanova, 2018).

Internet-based study packs are becoming more popular nowadays, because they allow teachers to extend the physical borders of the so called English-speaking zone from the classroom to the students' extra-curricular activities, family, social life. Moreover, such packs, as a rule, have an automatic homework assessment, what provides teachers with more time to develop the English-medium learning environment. As an example, a SeeSaw application can be used for providing students with creative homework without only right answer, the only demand is that work should be accomplished in English. Despite the fact that these home tasks are not obligatory, the majority of students do these tasks, because the freedom in terms of methods or deadlines for the tasks, allows student to be creative and enjoy the process.

Social component of English-medium learning environment is considered as significant one because school is not just an educational institution, but a place for children socialization. This is what helps students to develop communication skills and empathy – so called soft skills, which are considered to highly-demanded in the future. In terms of English-based learning environment, social component may be realized in out-of-class activities: student-teacher communication in English during breaks, stimulation of using English in creative activities (English Song Contest, English in Drawing Class, etc), various workshops and master-classes in English. All the mentioned is aimed to create an image of English not as just a school subject, but a tool of interpersonal communication, what develops the motivation to study English. The authors believe that motivation is an engine of educational process and can be significantly improved in the effective English-medium learning environment.

In terms of activity component, which is understood by Panov (2006) as a clarification of aims and methods of education – almost all schools with implemented English-medium learning environment in Tatarstan realize it in more or less successfully. The first and the most expensive option for school: to hire native English-speaking teachers for teaching English and designing social activities and learning environment. The second method, which is more spread – applying Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), when English is stated as a language of instructions for some school subjects. This approach purses a double goal: to learn the subject via learning English.

Some schools combine both methods. However, CLIL is criticized for the low level of subject knowledge, what does not allow the authors to name it as an ideal approach to create an English-based learning environment.

As an alternative option, Cambridge International Curriculum (CIC), or any other like this, should be mentioned. This one is a universal curriculum, designed especially for addition to any local curriculum. It means that students, for example, learn Mathematics in their native language with one teacher and later in English with another teacher – this helps student to create themselves a correct concept in their native language and to extend it later by covering the same topic in English. There are 3 officially approved Cambridge International Schools, and their experience in using CLIL became a source base for the current paper (Latypov and Sabirova, 2016).

## 5. Conclusion

The conclusions on the results of the study have both theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical significance of the research is that the definition of the learning environment is specified, taking into account the integration of linguistic, psychology and social science. The scientific novelty of the research is that learning environment was investigated in terms of the English language and English-medium learning that allows to make the process of English-medium learning environment creation well-structured and comprehensible. The practical implications of the research lie in the fact that its results may be used for further research and for development of a How to create an English-medium learning environment in Russian middle school: action sequence and examples project with a detailed recommendation list for teachers and school administrative staff.

## 6. Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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