Research article

The role of foreign language internships in cultural enrichment and increasing motivation for Russian students to learn Spanish

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ABSTRACT

Currently, many universities use the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. In contrast, Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) uses a mixed approach for these purposes, which combines both the abovementioned communicative method and the grammar-translation method, which is more traditional for Russian universities. Additionally, RUDN University provides an opportunity for students to continue learning the target language at foreign partner universities, where students can practice the language in its natural environment. In this regard, the serious research interest for us is which of our students’ language competencies will transform after graduation from these universities and how their motivation changes towards learning Spanish.

The vast majority of previous research on the role of foreign language internships in increasing students’ motivation to learn the target language focuses on issues related to motivation to learn the language within the framework of the communicative or grammar-translation method (Helmchen, Melo-Pfeifer, 2018; Germer, 2018; Marijuan and Sanz, 2018). This study approaches the question from a different angle and concentrates on the problem of motivating students who previously studied Spanish at a university that employs the mixed method for learning the foreign language and who later completed an internship at a partner university that in turn utilizes the communicative method.

To answer this research question, we aimed to conduct a study of the formed cultural and linguistic competencies of 3rd- and 4th-year students who were and who were not on foreign internships at Spanish partner universities of RUDN University. Based on the obtained data, this research demonstrates the need to change the established approaches not only to the practice of teaching Spanish but also to the conscious use of internships as a tool to increase the motivation of students to learn the target language.

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, with the development of immersive teaching practices, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach to foreign language (or in other words, “target language”) teaching has gradually gained ground. By the 1990s, it had become the most commonly used method of teaching foreign languages in the world, having almost completely overshadowed alternative target language teaching methods (Philipson, 2020). This approach has had a significant impact on Spanish-language teaching policy, forming the basis for the Spanish government’s officially recommended textbooks for teaching the language to foreigners. For this reason, by 2019, the official teaching manuals of the Instituto Cervantes (the official body of the Spanish Government in charge of organizing the teaching of the Spanish language for foreigners and promoting the cultural heritage of Spain and Latin America) were based entirely on the communicative methodology (Sotomayor et al., 2019).

At the same time, despite the popularity of the communicative approach, universities in many countries of Europe and the former Soviet Union (primarily countries such as the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) are reluctant to use this method to train future specialists. These universities focus on more traditional methods of teaching by using native languages (Hall and Cook, 2012; Shenderuk et al., 2018). In particular, they employ the conscious-practical method (better known in the West as the grammar-translation method). This tendency to utilize more traditional approaches to teaching foreign
languages is because the communicative method, despite all of its obvious advantages, namely, solving the problems of overcoming language barriers and developing the language skills of speaking in the target language, has significant drawbacks that do not allow it to be used as the only possible approach in educating practices (Turnbull and Dailley-O’Cain, 2009). Specifically, the communicative approach does not pay sufficient attention to building students’ skills in understanding grammatical structures or forming ideas about the structure of language, and it does not adequately use the capabilities of the native language to teach students (Khokhar et al., 2020; Swain and Lapkin, 2000). In this regard, universities in Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union are trying to abate the shortcomings of the approach by complementing teaching activities with their own developments (Sergeeva et al., 2019; Aubakirov and Dolgopolova, 2018; Lyubova et al., 2014).

Thus, on the one hand, there is the dominant approach to learning foreign languages, which is prescribed for use in teaching Spanish by the regulatory authorities of Spain. On the other hand, we can see that the real situation varies from country to country and depends on the factual context of teaching a foreign language (Mohd-Araf et al., 2019). The vast majority of previous research on the role of foreign language internships in increasing students’ motivation to learn the target language does not pay much attention to this problem, focusing instead on issues related to motivation to learn the language within the framework of the communicative or grammar-translation method (Helmchen, Melo-Pfeifer, 2018; Germer, 2018; Marijuan and Sanz, 2018). This study approaches the question from a different angle and concentrates on the problem of motivating students who previously studied Spanish at a university that employs the mixed method to learning the foreign language and who later completed an internship at a partner university that utilizes the communicative method.

2. Theory

2.1. Grammar-translation and communicative approach

In a short period of time, the communicative approach allows students to achieve tangible results and improvements in two-way oral communication (Adil, 2020). However, along with the advantages outlined above, this approach also has significant disadvantages. In particular, teaching within the framework of this approach does not allow students to gain a full understanding of how the grammar of the language and its syntax function (Fois, 2020). This is because the method mainly uses the practice of memorization of standard phrases and communicative expressions that can be understood by native speakers (Smirnova and Bagramova, 2018). However, we consider the main disadvantage of this method to be the universalistic nature of the approach itself, rather than the disadvantages listed above. This nature is manifested when a foreign language is taught according to the same models for all countries, according to the same textbooks, which form the standard language communication skills among students. Consequently, the communicative approach not only excludes adjusting to the local features of learning a foreign language but also does not use a student’s native language as an aid to the acquisition of a target language (Adil, 2020).

The vast majority of students learn the target language outside the country where it is spoken (Tilfaroglu, 2020). This means that they study it outside the natural language environment. Under these conditions, students cannot fully immerse themselves in the language they are learning. As a result, they cannot use the knowledge gained in the classroom in practice (Leyi, 2020). As a consequence, we believe that using a teaching method based on “repeating patterns/models” is not very effective when teaching a foreign language to students who are learning it outside its natural environment and who later are going to use it in their professional activities. We believe that for this category of students, the communicative method (assuming the memorization of standard expressions that are aimed primarily at establishing oral communication) does not allow them to form an understanding of the principles of language functioning, which future specialists could use to competently formulate their thoughts.

Russian universities, in the preparation of professional translators, prioritize the grammar-translation method, in contrast to language courses that focus on the communicative approach (Bartosh et al., 2020). This method employs the results of comparative linguistics and facilitates the learning process by comparing the foreign language with the mother tongue (To et al., 2015; Pishghadam, Ebrahim, 2019). It “enables to clarify coincidences and divergences in development; evolution and functioning of various languages, understand specific features of each one and work out linguistic laws” (Vinogradov, 1997). Within the framework of this approach, students learn how to understand the foreign language through the prism of their native languages, studying similar grammatical structures and identifying and focusing on the differences between them (Bangbanag, 2020). It helps students develop the skills of thinking and the correct construction of language structures in foreign languages (Nagy, 2020).

Thus, the major advantage of the grammar-translation method lies in the possibility of the comparative study of the native and the foreign language. Thus, relying on the learned grammatical constructions, students master the rules of functioning of language structures at both the phonetic and lexical levels (Núñez-Vázquez, Crismán-Pérez, 2021). This provides students with the tools to communicate easily, correctly, and creatively, which is never just a matter of reproducing learned patterns. The substantial advantage of the grammar-translation method for students who will later employ it in their professional activities is that it helps them develop two-way translation skills. These skills are not only useful for their future professional life but also valuable in today’s globalized world, which, because of the development of global communication technologies and instant systems of exchange of text information (messengers and e-mail), largely encourage competent written communication among people (Merchant, 2021).

In this article, we present the results of the research and practical activities conducted by a team of teachers of Spanish as a foreign language (LE) at Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University). Our main goal is to develop four skills in Spanish language learners: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. In view of the strong points and limitations of both methods, RUDN University has developed a mixed approach to teaching foreign languages. It is based on the grammar-translation method, which is traditional for Russian linguistics but also includes some elements of the communicative approach. Successfully applying this method, developed through the efforts of university specialists, several thousand professionals have been trained in professional fields that actively use foreign languages.

2.2. Internship programmes

The practical implementation of our university’s combined approach to learning Spanish is carried out at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, where students are prepared for their future professional activities in the interpreter programme for four years, 10 h per week. Given that a full-fledged study of the language is impossible without studying the cultural aspects of it (Ortactepe and Okkali, 2021; Heidari et al., 2014; Butt et al., 2000), students must demonstrate not only professional proficiency in Spanish with the possibility of two-way translation, both oral and written, but also knowledge of the history, culture, and traditions of the countries where the language is spoken to show their readiness for future work in their specialty.

Taking into account the importance of this side of the issue, disciplines such as “Historical, philosophical and cultural aspects of the Spanish fiction text”, “History and culture of Latin America”, “Spanish by films”, “Spanish holidays and traditions” are included in the Spanish course at the faculty (Khimiitz, 2012). This theoretical part is certainly important, but Russian students can obtain a full understanding of Spanish culture only if they go to study in a Spanish-speaking country, where they will be able to independently apply theoretical knowledge.
Language internships play a special role in the cultural enrichment of participating students, and this role becomes abundantly clear if we compare them with non-linguistic internships. In the latter case, the key goal of students arriving in the host country is obtaining professional knowledge and skills. They tend to see familiarity with the culture and ways of life in a foreign country as a secondary task; they find it important only to the extent required for successful completion of their studies (Kamalova et al., 2021). In contrast, for students who focus on language studies while staying in the host country, cultural enrichment and understanding the context, in which a specific language functions, is an integral part of honing their expert skills, equally important for their career and professional growth (Prieto-Arranz et al., 2021).

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We should also note that the higher education system in Russia has an important distinctive feature. In many cases, the choice of specialisation by future students depends not so much on their own desire or motivation to study, but rather on the will of their parents, who pay for their studies at the university and want their children to take up a specific occupation in the future. According to our surveys held among foreign languages students, their motivation to study may be rather weak since, as students have pointed out themselves, their parents were the ones who chose this specialisation for them (there is about 32% of all cases from our university) (see Appendix). This situation gradually improves over time thanks to the efforts of our academic staff, who try to involve the students in a variety of learning activities. However, when students are offered an opportunity to take part in a foreign internship, they find themselves in a difficult situation again. It is highly likely that the cost of internship will be covered by their parents since most students cannot afford to pay for their studies abroad because of the difficult economic situation in Russia. In this case, participation in internship programmes has virtually nothing to do with a student's personal motivation, it depends on the external conditions that lie beyond their control.

RUDN University offers dual master's and doctoral programmes with the University of the Balearic Islands, as well as double master's programmes with the Complutense University of Madrid. To be able to enrol in these dual study programmes and continue their professional studies abroad, students must show not only high academic performance in their main professional programme but also a high level of proficiency in Spanish. Given the importance of preparing future professionals in the natural language environment, the university organizes various language courses and Erasmus internship programmes to prepare students for future study in dual master's and doctoral programmes with Spanish partner universities.

### 3. Aims and objectives

In the Spanish partner universities of RUDN University, as in the overwhelming majority of other universities in Western countries, teaching foreign languages to students is carried out using the communicative approach (Vold, Brkan, 2020). In contrast, in most universities in the countries of the former Soviet Union for this purpose the grammar-translation method is utilized (Bartosh et al., 2020). Considering both the positive aspects of these approaches and their limitations, RUDN University specialists have developed a mixed one to teaching foreign languages which is based on the grammar-translation method, traditional for Russian linguistics, with the inclusion of elements of the communicative approach. Moreover, since RUDN University actively participates in exchange programs with foreign universities, for us, the serious research interest is the problem of motivating students who previously studied Spanish at a university that employs the mixed method for learning the foreign language and who later completed an internship at a partner university that in turn utilizes the communicative method.

To answer this research question, we aimed to conduct a study of the formed cultural and linguistic competencies of 3rd- and 4th-year students, who were divided into two groups:

1) Students who had returned from foreign internships with Spanish partner universities of RUDN University (23 people).
2) Students who had not participated in the internship programmes with Spanish universities and who had not travelled abroad for this purpose (56 people).

To achieve this aim, we formulated the following tasks, the consistent solution of which would help us find an answer to the research question:

1) Conduct a grammar test between the two groups of students to determine how successfully they have mastered the basic rules of Spanish grammar and compare their results.
2) Ask the students to write an essay that would show their ability to consistently and accurately express their thoughts in the foreign language, as well as reveal the degree of their immersion in the cultural context of Spain.
3) Take a motivational test to determine if the motivation for learning the language has changed among the students who have completed the internship programmes with Spanish universities.

Before the internship programme, both groups of students demonstrated the same level of Spanish proficiency during the exams. Students who did not take part in the programme stayed in Russia and continued their language studies at RUDN University. In turn, the students who came back from their internships abroad immediately resumed their studies at the university.

### 4. Materials and methods

#### 4.1. Design

Our research goal includes the following objectives which are instrumental for finding the answer to our research question:

1) Conduct a grammar test among the two groups of students to determine their knowledge of the basic rules of Spanish grammar and compare their results.
2) Ask both groups of students to write an essay to test their ability to consistently and accurately express their thoughts in the foreign
language, as well as establish the degree of their immersion in the Spanish cultural context.

3) Ask both groups of students to complete a motivational test to determine whether or not the motivation for language studies may change for those students who took part in internship programmes with Spanish universities.

4) Analyse the data obtained by using relevant methods.

4.2. Materials

The grammar test, essay, and motivational survey data among 3rd- and 4th-year students were used as the research material. The total number of collected works was 79. The results were divided into two groups: the questionnaires of those who were on the internship (29%) and those who were not (71%).

Teaching Spanish at RUDN University is conducted according to its own system, which divides language learning into blocks of courses and not in accordance with the steps adopted in the international classification. The grammar test was compiled from the key topics that students had completed by the end of the third year of education. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), this amount of knowledge corresponds approximately to level B2. It includes the following sections of grammar: relative and indefinite pronouns, the imperative mood, the difference between past tenses, the use of the subjunctive in the sequence of sentences, complement and subject clauses, concessive clauses, and relative and time clauses. Moreover, the test contained conditional sentences, sentences with infinitives, sentences with the future tense, and conditional sentences as a probability.

It should be noted that in the grammar test, we assigned ourselves the task of checking how students mastered the grammar of the Spanish language, mainly through the category of the verb. Our choice of this category as the key one was dictated by the understanding that the Spanish and Russian languages function in different ways. The greatest difficulties for Russian-speaking students are caused by the use of tenses and verb constructions (Tirado, 2018).

Since there are only five indicative tenses in Russian, there is no sequence to sentences, and there are no tenses of the subjunctive mood (Timoshenko, 2019). Thus, by checking the assimilation of verb constructions and their use, we could reveal whether there were any changes in the formation of the participants’ grammatical language competencies.

In the second block, students were asked to write a short essay (not longer than one page) according to the following criteria:

1. Choose any historical event that, in their opinion, had the greatest influence on the development of the Spanish nation.
2. Explain the choice.
3. Explain how, in their opinion, this event has been reflected in contemporary Spain.

The aim of writing the essay was not to identify gaps in grammar, nor the difficulties of expressing one’s own thoughts in Spanish. It was intended to reflect the knowledge of Spanish history and culture that students had acquired.

The third block was a survey about motivation to learn Spanish. Students were asked to indicate why they began learning Spanish and whether they were on the internship in Spain. Three additional questions were addressed to those respondents who were on the internship:

1) Has your attitude towards learning Spanish changed after finishing your internship in Spain?
2) What exactly motivated you to study the language during your stay in Spain?
3) What is the difference in your attitude towards language learning before and after your trip?

The respondents could choose several suggested answers to these questions or give their own. Thus, we were able to collect the data describing the students’ motivation to learn Spanish which will be used for subsequent analysis.

4.3. Methods and data analyses

The data analysis included three main stages. First, we examined the grammar test data. For this purpose, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Quantitative tools enabled us to consider the mistakes made by students in numerical terms. Comparative data analysis was used for identifying the general trends and variations in the knowledge of grammar topics across the two groups of students who did or did not take part in the international internships. This method enabled us to find and rank the most challenging aspects of Spanish grammar for Russian-speaking students, as shown in Figure 1. After that, we checked the assimilation of verb constructions and their use by students and uncovered the changes in the formation of the participants’ grammar competencies.

At the second stage, we used the Voyant Tools software system (https://voyant-tools.org/) to analyse student essays. This is a web platform that allows users to scan, examine, and represent large arrays of initial data in a convenient form for subsequent analysis. Before using this system, we prepared two text corpora based on the essays of students who did and did not take part in internships, respectively. To this end, we removed all function words from the texts, i.e., all words that do not have an independent semantic meaning which cannot be derived from other words, namely, prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and auxiliaries verbs. All other parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, particles, and adverbs were not removed to avoid possible distortions in research findings. This enabled us to locate the most used words across all corpora. Thanks to a visual representation of these words in the Voyant Tools, we were able to analyse the perceptions of Spanish history and culture by the students who wrote the essays.

At the third stage, we studied the answers to motivational questions in the survey. First, we converted the data into numerical format and evaluated this numerical data by ranking the students’ responses to questions. Then we prepared graphs and tables showing the obtained results. In addition, qualitative content analysis was used for materials that could not be measured numerically. In particular, essay content and open responses to motivational questions were analysed separately. This enabled us to establish the changes in the students’ motivation to learn Spanish.

4.4. Key terms

For the sake of clarity in terms of vocabulary, we believe we should include the definitions for the key terms used in this study which may be ambiguous for the readers. The term “motivation”, which is crucial for this research project, can be defined as one’s internal attitude towards acting in a certain way (Markus, Kitayama, 1991), in our case towards learning Spanish. The term “attitude” means a feeling towards something or someone (Ajzen, Fishbein, 1977). And finally, “grammatical competence”, for the purposes of this research, means the knowledge of grammar, syntax, words, and morphology in a person’s mind (Cook, 2016).

4.5. The ethics statement

The study was conducted in full compliance with the ethical requirements spelt out in the Cell Press Editorial Ethics Policies

1 We prepared the text corpora for subsequent research in line with the recommendations of the Voyant Tools developers published on their official website (https://voyant-tools.org/docs/#/guide/stopwords).
and Elsevier’s Publishing Ethics Policies and was approved by the Ethics Committee of RUDN University. All volunteers who took part in this study provided their informed consent regarding the actions performed towards them as part of this research, the resulting data, the subsequent processing, the results, and the final publication.

5. Results

The analysis carried out within the framework of the adopted methodology produced the following results.

5.1. The grammatical part

In this part of the study, we focused on how the grammatical competencies of students who did and did not take part in internships have changed one by one.

Based on the graph (see Figure 1), we can see the most problematic grammatical topics for Russian-speaking students to master.

The issues most often arise when the sequence of tenses with subjunctive is used (line 11 in Figure 1) and in the case of employing subjunctives in auxiliary and subject sentences (lines 5–10 in Figure 1). Some difficulties were caused by applying infinitive constructions (line 2.

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![Figure 1. Percentage of students who made mistakes in the grammar test on the specified topics.](image-url)
in Figure 1). At the same time, the percentage of those who made mistakes on this topic was even higher among those who had been on foreign internships than among those who had not. However, conditional clauses (line 13 in Figure 1) for describing possible or desired actions did not cause problems for students who completed the internships, unlike those who studied Spanish only in Russia. Thus, we can conclude that such a difference is explained by the fact that students who were on the internships better mastered those grammatical structures that are most often used in colloquial speech. In contrast to students who did not attend the internships and who, for the most part, encountered these structures in training sessions within the walls of the university, without practicing them in the framework of live communication.

At the same time, as can be seen from lines 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and 11 in Figure 1, students who had not undergone the internships, did not make more mistakes than those who had completed them. Moreover, it turned out that in some cases, these students were more successful than their colleagues who had studied in Spain (lines 1, 12, 16 in Figure 1). In general, for most of the questions, the two groups of respondents showed little difference in the number of mistakes made.

We evaluated the grammar test results in the context of the idea that the internships should improve various language skills, including grammar, which would motivate the student to continue studying. However, the results show that the internships did not improve the understanding of these grammatical topics among the participants. The factors causing differences and similarities between the two groups can be very diverse: from an insufficient study of these topics within the program to issues with the individual assimilation of the material. In any case, the obtained data arouses research interest for us and requires a new separate detailed study, which is beyond the scope of this one, because it focuses on the problem of cultural enrichment and increasing motivation students to learn Spanish.

Meanwhile, the data obtained, and the analysis carried out show that students from the group who underwent the internships at the universities using the communicative approach to teaching the foreign language did not have a noticeable improvement in the acquisition of topics related to grammar. Therefore, in our subsequent work with these students within the framework of our mixed approach, we should focus on the purposeful development of these grammatical skills.

![Figure 2. Essay topics were chosen by students.](image)
5.2. Essays

In the essays, students could choose freely the event that, in their opinion, had the greatest impact on the history of Spain. It should be noted that they already had a certain educational background since the course on the history of Spain before the twentieth century (in Spanish) had been taught to them in the third year of study. This means that all participants had some prior knowledge of all topics covered in their essays (see Figure 2).

The range of topics was quite wide. Analysing the resulting list, we note that for Russian-speaking students, the most significant periods in the history of Spain were the periods of Roman rule, the Reconquista, and the Civil War (1936–1939). The students who participated in the internship also paid special attention to the positive influence of Islamic culture in Spanish civilization.

The visualization performed with the software analysis of the data helped us obtain a general idea of the content of the essays (see Figures 3 and 4).

The most frequent words in the corpus were reconquista (the Reconquista) (31), nación (the nation) (18), guerra (the war) (17), formación (the formation) (16), and península (the peninsula) (15).

According to the data in Figure 3, the students who did not complete their internship were most attracted to the topic of the formation of the Spanish nation and the historical narratives associated with it. It must be pointed out that the respondents of this group used the word “war” much more often than their colleagues from the other group.

The most frequent words in the corpus were inquisición (the Inquisition) (24), cultura (the culture) (13), árabe (the Arabs) (11), nación (the nation) (11), and leyenda (the legend) (9).

Students who were on foreign internships were more likely to choose topics related to cultural aspects. They were concerned with subjects such as the Inquisition, Arab heritage, the influence of Muslim culture on Spanish civilization, and the Spanish Black Legend. In some cases, with the free choice of topic, respondents emphasized that the culture of Spain aroused the greatest interest to them:

“Me gustaría escribir no sobre un evento histórico, sino sobre una cultura formada a través del arte” (“I would like to write not about a historical event, but about the culture that formed through art”).

“La convivencia de las tres culturas [cristiana, islámica y judía] fue, sin duda, un elemento enriquecedor para la cultura hispana, pues cada una de ellas aportaba elementos esenciales que complementaban a las otras dos” (“The coexistence of the three cultures [Christian, Islamic and Jewish] was, without a doubt, an enriching element for Spanish culture, since each of them contributed essential elements that complemented the other two”).

Moreover, even in the case of describing the discovery of America, the respondents preferred to focus on the spread of Spanish culture in the American continent:

“Al colonizar el territorio enorme en el continente nuevo, el Estado no solo se enriquecía sino también extendía su cultura incluso el idioma y la religión” (“By colonizing the enormous territory on the new continent, the state not only got rich but also spread its culture including language and religion”).

Furthermore, the respondents who completed the internship were the only ones who considered the Spanish transition to democracy one of the key events in Spanish history.

5.3. Motivation

The last part of the research, which contained a survey, showed differences in the perception of learning Spanish between the two groups.

The first part included a common question for everyone: what is Spanish for you now?

By and large, the general nature of the responses was related to potential employment, the importance of cultural aspects, and communication. However, the majority of those surveyed who were not on the internship associated the study of Spanish primarily with the possibility of increasing the chances of finding a job. In particular, their responses included phrases such as the following:

“Interact with Spanish-speaking work partners”, "a significant career advantage", "an opportunity for a future career", and "an opportunity to build a career".

In turn, the respondents who participated in the internship emphasized the cultural aspect:

"An opportunity to understand Spanish culture" and "an opportunity to experience a new culture".

Only the respondents who had studied abroad were required to answer the second part of the questions.

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2 The Spanish Black Legend is a tendency in historiography, proponents of which believe that some historical texts about Spain contain anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish propaganda that came from the countries that were rivals of the Spanish empire (Domínguez, 2021).
1) "Has your attitude towards learning Spanish changed after your internship in Spain?" (see Figure 5)

The vast majority of respondents said "yes" but provided various reasons, such as "the language has become more alive for me," "the level of language proficiency has increased," or "certain goals appeared in my life that related to the language". Only two survey participants answered "no", citing the fact that she/he has always enjoyed learning Spanish.

2) "What exactly during your stay in Spain motivated you the most to learn the language?" (see Figure 6).

When answering this question, most of the respondents chose the opportunity to practice with a native speaker. The next most popular answers were communication with the Spaniards and the culture of Spain, respectively.

In the column where students could give free answers to the question, there appeared responses that indicate the immersion of respondents in...
an environment that is favourable for learning the language by using the communicative approach:

“The desire to live fully, the people around, all inscriptions, all TV programmes, all documents, in other words, everything that I wanted to see and try - was somehow connected with the language...”.

"The realization that I am understood and I understand people."

3) “What is the difference in your attitude towards language learning before and after the trip”? (See Figure 7).

The first three options were the most popular answers to the question, reflecting a positive change in perceptions of Spanish:

1. The language and culture of Spain have become an integral part of me.
2. I have found the meaning of life, which is now associated with the Spanish language.
3. I realized what kind of job I want to get and understood that for this job I need a good knowledge of Spanish.

Again, similar to the answer to question “2,” only two people responded that the internship did not affect their attitude towards learning Spanish.

In additional comments, respondents reiterated the importance of live communication and the influence of Spanish culture on them:

“In any case, language and experience cannot be thrown out of my head, and it has expanded my views and horizons. The degree of their love of life and democracy is really impressive”.

"I realized how many opportunities open up when you know the language at a good level.”

One of the participants in the survey also drew attention to the attractiveness of the communicative approach because it gives the ability to instantly apply the acquired knowledge in practice:

“Studying in Spain was mostly in the form of interactive activities. It allowed me to apply what I learned in real situations (when I was on an internship). When I was in Spain, there were communication and games through which I could learn grammar and new words.”

In general, the vast majority of respondents assessed the internship in Spain in a positive way, noting that it helped many of them not only improve their language skills but also understand why they need to continue to learn the Spanish language.

6. Conclusions

The grammar test showed that internships offered by RUDN University’s foreign partners, where the communicative method is used, do not work for improving grammar. It, in turn, means that the internships do not motivate our students to study the grammar of the Spanish language. Thus, it indicates that the mixed approach to learning the foreign language chosen at RUDN University, with the focus on acquiring grammar skills, is adequate for the current situation of studying Spanish for Russian-speaking students. Since without paying special attention to the grammar topics from the side of their teachers, the grammar remains the most difficult to master by these students (see section 5).

On the other hand, essays and motivational tests have shown more positive results. The students who completed internships were able to gain a deeper understanding of the language and cultural environment in Spain. In addition, this study has been highly useful for lecturers specialising in the history and culture of Spain as they can use it for adjusting their courses in line with the most relevant topics. According to the vast majority of students, internships not only helped them develop their Spanish communication skills but also strengthened their motivation to continue learning the language after coming back to their native country.
Based on the data obtained, we can conclude that the communicative approach works well for expanding the cultural horizons and boosting the motivation of Spanish language students. In contrast, the grammar-translation method provides them with good insights into the structure and grammar of a given language. A combination of these two methods works much better in terms of the development of the learners’ linguistic and general cultural competencies than the isolated use of a single approach.

7. Discussion

Even though research findings show that internships have a positive impact on the students’ language competencies and motivation to learn Spanish, a few precautions are called for.

First, the sample used in this study only includes two groups of students, 79 people in total, which means that these research findings cannot be generalised. However, they are consistent with the results of related studies investigating the impact of the communicative approach on shaping language and general cultural competencies among university students, conducted with both larger and smaller samples (Di Silvio et al., 2016; Samorodova et al., 2021).

Second, the grammar test was used as the main tool for assessing the students’ grammatical competencies, while their oral skills were not considered. For the purposes of our study, grammar appears to be the most relevant aspect since, owing to the difference in language systems, Spanish grammar appears to be especially challenging for Russian-speaking students. While other indicators could offer additional data for analysis, they are not likely to cause any fundamental variations in the language competencies we investigated.

Based on the grammar test, we were able to draw an important conclusion that when it comes to teaching Spanish, it may be not enough to solely rely on the communicative approach, and the most effective modus operandi would be to combine it with other methods which can help students grasp the internal structure of the Spanish language.

8. Contribution of research

This study shows that we need to contest the established approaches not only to teaching Spanish but also to using internships as a special tool for boosting the students’ motivation to learn the target language. We need to further investigate the topics that may increase student motivation before and after internships and update the courses and curriculum in line with the changing needs of students. By doing so, we can find the most effective ways to unzip the students’ psychological resources. Thus, in addition to practical implementation, this study opens doors to a series of research projects focused on making and delivering courses that can be swiftly adapted to boost the students’ motivation to learn the Spanish language.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Irina Veselova: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.
Galina Khimich: Conceived and designed the experiments; Wrote the paper. Ekaterina Terentieva: Performed the experiments; Wrote the paper.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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