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## The language environment as a means of developing foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool children

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to revealing the content of the concept of the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool children. Existing interpretations of the term "environment" in scientific literature are provided. The terms used by specialists in relation to the environment as a means of forming communicative competence are defined, including: "language environment," "speech environment," and "communication environment." The semantic content of these terms is analyzed, and it is concluded that each corresponds to the thematic direction of the research within which it is proposed. It is substantiated that in the context of mastering a foreign language, the term "language environment" should be used concerning the environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence, as such an environment does not always imply communication or interaction. It is determined that the environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence is a set of conditions representing the features of real reality under which the formation of foreign language communicative competence occurs and which serve as a means of such formation. The set of conditions that constitute the language environment is grouped as follows: spatial conditions (micro- and macro-space, individual space), subjective conditions (the number and characteristics of individuals who are transmitters of the foreign language), conditions of the material world (features of the physical environment), speech-communicative conditions (features of input, output, and feedback), and motivational conditions (a set of external and internal factors that motivate the acquisition of foreign language communicative competence). The author proposes a definition of the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool children as a set of spatial, subjective, speech-communicative, motivational, and material world conditions, under which the formation of foreign language communicative competence occurs and which, in their totality and interaction, ensure and determine such formation.

**Keywords:** language environment, speech environment, communication environment, middle preschool children, foreign language communicative competence.

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### 1. Introduction

In the modern globalized world, the study of foreign languages is an important component of the success of the growing generation. In Ukraine, the necessity of early mastery of a foreign language is currently recognized not only by scientists and individual preschool education institutions but also enshrined at the legislative level. The adoption of the Law of Ukraine "On the Use of the English Language in Ukraine" in June 2024 shifted the requirement for learning English as a language of international communication to the realm of preschool education. This fact has presented new

challenges for preschool pedagogy in Ukraine, particularly the need to develop effective methods for creating a language environment in preschool institutions as a means of developing foreign language communicative competence in children. The first step in this process should be the development of a concept of the language environment as a means of mastering a foreign language within preschool institutions, its content, and elements, which, on one hand, aims to address relevant issues in Ukrainian pedagogical science, and on the other hand, contributes to enriching international scientific thought with new findings in the field of early foreign language acquisition, which defines the relevance of this research.

## **2. Object and Subject of Research**

The object of the research is the formation of foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool children.

The subject of the research is the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool children.

## **3. Goal and Objectives of the Research**

The goal of the article is to clarify the definition of "language environment" as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool children and to determine the conditions that constitute the content of such a language environment.

## **4. Literature Review**

In order to develop the concept of the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool children, it is considered appropriate to first turn to the interpretation of the term "environment".

According to the Great Explanatory Dictionary of the Modern Ukrainian Language and the Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language, environment is "a set of natural conditions in which the life activity of any organism occurs; the socio-domestic conditions of human life" [1, 2]. Thus, the content of the concept of environment is revealed through the concept of "conditions," which in turn are defined as "the features of real reality in which something occurs or is realized" [1].

In the Dictionary of Basic Concepts in the course "Pedagogy," the environment is defined as "everything that surrounds a child from birth to the end of life, starting with the family, the immediate environment, and ending with the social environment in which they are born and which creates conditions for their development and education; a complex and ambiguous system of conditions for the development of the individual, on one hand opposing the individual, and on the other, changing through the actions and deeds of the person themselves; the surrounding social space (overall - as the macro-environment, in specific contexts - as the immediate social environment, as the micro-environment); the zone of immediate activity of the individual, their closest development, and activity" [3]. The concise dictionary of pedagogical terms defines the environment as a complex of external phenomena that persistently act on a person and significantly influence their development [4]. In a psychological context, in reference literature, the environment (external) is viewed as a set of social and physical conditions in which a person or social community develops [5].

In foreign psychological-pedagogical literature, the concepts of the term environment can be found in the works of I. Ten, J. Gibson, and M. Heidmets. Among domestic scholars, the general formulation of the concept of "environment" can be found in the studies of L. Karpova, A. Yablonsky, V. Yagupov, I. Kabayeva, L. Tereshchenko, M. Bratko, M. Yankovchuk, and O. Linnik. Table 1 presents an overview of the content of the concepts of "environment" proposed by these scholars.

**Table 1.** Definition of the Concept of "Environment" in Psychological and Pedagogical Literature

<i>Author</i>	<i>Definition of the Concept of "Environment"</i>
H. Taine	Physical, psychological, cultural, spiritual, and social surroundings: "Nature, ... fellow-men, ... physical and social circumstances, ... climate, ... state policy" [6], as well as "the general state of minds" [7].
J. Gibson	"Environment will refer to the surroundings of those organisms that perceive and behave, that is to say, animals. The environment consists of the surroundings of animals. In one sense the surroundings of a single animal are the same as the surroundings of all animals but that in another sense the surroundings of a single animal are different from those of any other animal." [8]. In the environment of any animal, in addition to inanimate objects, there are also other animals. The environment differs from the physical environment [8]. The environment consists of characteristics of the physical world that are perceived by the living being.
M. Heidmets	"By environment, we should understand that part of the surrounding world with which the subject interacts, either directly or indirectly, in an open or latent form... there exists one world with a multitude of different environments that differ in their objective characteristics and methods of connection with subjects or with the system" [9].
L. Karpova	"Substance that fills space, as well as the body that surrounds something; surroundings, a set of natural conditions in which the activity of human society and organisms takes place; surrounding socio-economic conditions, setting, as well as a group of people connected by the commonality of these conditions" [10].
A. Yablonsky	"A broad concept, encompassing a set of external conditions, factors, and objects, with which an organism and personality interact and develop" [11].
V. Yagupov	"Everything that surrounds a person – starting from the family, including the social environment that creates conditions for their development, socialization, and formation as an individual" [12].
I. Kabayeva, L. Tereshchenko	"From a pedagogical perspective, the environment is the condition for a child's life activity, the formation of attitudes towards basic values, the assimilation of social experience, the development of essential personal qualities, a way of transforming external relationships into the inner structure of the personality, and the satisfaction of the subject's needs" [13].
M. Bratko	"The environment consists of a combination of natural, material, and social factors that directly or indirectly affect a person. The environment is what exists between objects, it is a 'mediator' between them" [14].
M. Yankovchuk	"Environment is the social space that surrounds a person (in general, as a macroenvironment, in a specific sense, as the immediate social environment, as a microenvironment), as well as the zone of direct activity of the individual, the zone of their closest development and action." [15].
O. Linnik	"A dynamic system of conditions that forms the context of the subject's activity, as a result of which there is a mutual enrichment of cultural values and meanings." [16].
O. Yezhova	"Human surroundings: the environment, social environment, living environment, etc. It is an organized and homogeneous part of space based on a specific characteristic... The environment necessarily involves a person, and in it, there is mutual influence and interaction between the surroundings and the person" [17].

The environment represents a multifaceted phenomenon that, beginning in the natural sciences, gradually transitioned to the humanities and is now widely studied, particularly by sociology, psychology, and pedagogy. From the pedagogical perspective, the phenomenon of the environment was considered by L. Vygotsky [18], J. Korczak [19], V. Sukhomlynskyi [20], and M. Montessori [21]. Currently, in pedagogical terminology, the term "educational environment" is used in relation to the environment (I. Gaba, A. Katyshev, O. Petrenko, O. Yaroshynska, O. Yezhova, O. Reypolska) [22, 23, 19, 24, 25, 26], "developmental environment" (S. Smolyuk, M. Kudla, O. Kovalenko) [27, 28, 29], "learning environment" (T. Yakovenko, V. Bykov) [30, 31], "upbringing environment" (M. Hahorin, A. Kolomoets, L. Lutsenko, S. Kulbida) [32, 33], "natural educational environment" (L. Zaitseva, H. Tsvetkova) [26]. In most cases, emphasis is placed on the importance of the environment's influence on the upbringing, learning, and development of a person.

The same applies to communicative competence, which also forms under the influence of the environment in natural conditions during ontogenesis. When born, a child acquires speech, its sociocultural characteristics, a value attitude towards its significance, and communicative abilities under the influence of the environment in which they are located. It is the environment and its quality that determine the level of formation or lack of certain elements of communicative competence in a child. The absence of speech in the environment leads to the underdevelopment of language competence, as seen in feral children, due to the irreversible loss of the sensitive period for speech development [34, 35]; a lack of communicative interaction results in the underdevelopment of active speech, i.e., speech competence, in children of deaf parents [36]; studying a language outside the country where it is spoken often prevents the formation of the sociocultural component of communicative competence.

In the scientific literature, the environment that influences the formation of communicative competence is defined as "speech environment" [37], "language environment" [38, 39], "communicative environment" [40]. Table 2 visually demonstrates the definitions of these terms found in the scientific literature.

**Table 2.** Definitions of the term "environment" in the context of forming communicative competence

<i>Author</i>	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition</i>
A. Bohush	Speech Environment	"A set of family, domestic, socio-pedagogical unorganized and purposeful communication conditions in the systems "adult (parents, relatives, caregiver, teacher) - child", "child - adult", "child - child", "adult - adult"[37].
L. Kalmykova, H. Kalmykov, I. Lapshina, N. Kharchenko	Speech/Language Environment	"Speech that a person (child, adult) perceives in natural conditions: speech from family members, friends, acquaintances, radio, television, books, magazines, newspapers, computer technology, etc. It is the totality of all speech products that a child can perceive" [38].
N. Zakhlyupina	Communicative Environment	"Speech that a person perceives in natural conditions"[40].
O. Yazlovytska	Language Environment	"A complex and dynamic concept that includes the physical environment, its participants, cultural context, and social norms regulating the use of language" [39].
A. Paronykyan	Language Environment	"Society in terms of its influence on the acquisition of a foreign language by individuals from a different ethnic group in the country of the respective ethnicity" [41].
L. Nakonyechna	Speech Environment	"The environment in which speech, being a non-literary variety of the national language (dialectal, mixed, colloquial speech), exists"

**Continued table 1**

	Language Environment	"The environment in which different languages, whether related or unrelated, function and the environment where a foreign language for a person exists" [42].
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The analysis of the mentioned definitions allows us to conclude that they are highly specialized and align with the thematic focus of the research within which they were proposed. For example, A. Bohush, focusing on the conditions of communication among speakers, emphasizes the factor of communication and interaction in the concept of environment as a means of developing communicative competence. L. Kalmykova, H. Kalmykov, I. Lapshina, N. Kharchenko limit the environment for the formation of communicative competence to the element of input, i.e., passively perceived speech. L. Nakonyechna highlights the type of speech and the number of languages in the environment, while O. Yazlovyt'ska focuses on the content elements of the language environment.

Given this, it is relevant to develop a specialized definition of the content of the environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool-aged children.

### 5. Research Methods

During the research, the following theoretical methods were used: literature and documentation analysis, a number of general theoretical methods such as abstraction and concretization, analysis and synthesis, comparison, contrast, structuring, induction, and deduction.

### 6. Results of the Study

In the context of forming foreign language communicative competence, despite the fact that the ultimate goal of such formation is to ensure the ability to engage in speech communication in a foreign language at a certain level, the means of such formation are various types of environments, some of which do not imply communication and interaction using foreign language speech. Thus, the environments that ensure the formation of foreign language communicative competence are not always communicative and speech-related. Given this, we believe that the term "language environment" should be used in relation to the environment in which the formation of foreign language communicative competence takes place.

Based on the analysis of scientific opinions on the concepts of "environment" and "language environment," we consider *language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence* to be the set of conditions as particularities of the real world in which the formation of foreign language communicative competence occurs, and which serve as the means of such formation.

The analysis of scientific literature dedicated to the processes of forming foreign language communicative competence allowed us to identify the following conditions that make up the language environment:

1) **Spatial Conditions**, that represent the place or spatial units of the formation of foreign language communicative competence. They can be divided into macro-spatial and micro-spatial conditions. *Macro-spatial conditions* include the country, region, and settlement within which the formation of foreign language communicative competence occurs. In particular, conditions where a country has a high level of circulation of a foreign language or its proximity to regions where the foreign language is widespread serve as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence. For example, it is easier for an English-speaking monolingual child to acquire French-speaking communicative competence in Canada, where French-speaking minorities live, than in the United Kingdom, which is geographically distant from French-speaking regions. *Micro-spatial conditions* include specific institutions, such as family, educational institutions, etc., with their characteristic features that influence the formation of foreign language communicative competence. For instance,

a family environment where the child lives with a native speaker of the foreign language may serve as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence. F. Benson defined the set of macro and micro-spatial conditions of the language environment as "spatial environment" [43]. At the same time, the use of certain spatial features in the formation of foreign language communicative competence is individual. The set of features used by an individual, according to F. Benson, is termed "*individual space*". The "individual space" of the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence includes all those territorial and institutional units in which a particular child acquires foreign language communicative competence.

2) Subjective Conditions as features of the subject composition of the surrounding environment, i.e., the people who are the transmitters and role models for foreign language communicative competence. The characteristics of these subjects that influence the formation of foreign language communicative competence include the total number of foreign language transmitters, their status as native speakers or foreign language learners, their familiarity with the child's native language, personal qualities, attitudes toward the foreign language, interest in its transmission, and knowledge in the field of foreign language communicative competence development.

3) Conditions of the Object World - these are the material components of acquiring foreign language communicative competence and include the characteristics of the physical environment of the child, which, affecting all sensory systems of the child, contribute to the formation of foreign language communicative competence. Such features include the accessibility of objects of material culture of the people whose language the child is learning, such as authentic children's literature, television, household items, toys, etc.; authentic design of spaces where the child's foreign language communicative competence is formed; and the child's exposure to written foreign language speech, such as posters, signs, badges, plaques, announcements, etc.

4) Speech-Communicative Conditions. The features of speech-communicative activity that surround the child. Primarily, these are the characteristics of input, output, and feedback that exist in the child's environment and serve as means of forming foreign language communicative competence. Features of input – foreign language speech that the child perceives – as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence include intensity, quality, clarity, and consistency.

It is expected that, since children of middle preschool age have a natural, unconscious way of acquiring foreign language communicative competence, the **intensity** of input is one of the main conditions of the language environment that influences this acquisition. Scientifically, it has been proven that the ideal situation is a balanced ratio of all languages in the child's life. In any case, scientific studies confirm that the presence of languages in a ratio of 80 to 20 percent does not lead to the development of a child's ability to use a foreign language in real-life communication situations [36].

According to the conclusions of M. Waits, S. Pall, A. Metson [44], the **quality** of input as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence is determined by the following factors:

- Adapted speech: This involves using a specific articulation of speech, including clear intonation, raised tone, emphasis on important parts of the utterances, and a slowed-down speech tempo, among others [44]. The importance of adapted speech increases as the child's level of foreign language proficiency decreases.
- Variety of input: This refers to the richness of vocabulary and syntactical structures in the child's environment, excluding limitations to household communication situations.
- Ritualized language: The use of repetitive phrases that are consistently associated with specific activities, which can serve as an initial basis for the child's acquisition of foreign language communicative competence and later be transferred to other communication situations.
- Avoidance of translation: This implies a clear distinction between foreign language and native language environments for the child, with the prohibition of mixing languages in order to ensure the natural motivation for the child's acquisition of foreign language communicative competence. This

approach is based on creating conditions in which children feel the need to master the foreign language.

**Clarity** of input involves the existence of conditions that allow children to grasp its meaning and accessible means of such comprehension, such as direct translation or parallel use of the child's native language, contextualization (supporting the input with the corresponding communication situation), non-verbal (gestures, facial expressions, visual aids), and verbal (clarification, paraphrasing, comparison, use of synonyms, simplification) support. In the case of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool-aged children, the predominant means of achieving understanding of foreign input are contextualization, verbal, and non-verbal support.

The inherent input of such a feature as **coherence** is a significant condition in the composition of the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence. This statement is based on the conclusions of scientific research, according to which passive input or simple reception of language does not lead to the emergence of active speech in children [35]. Active speech in a foreign language appears in children through interaction with more experienced adults or peers. According to M. Long's theory of comprehensible input, true understanding of foreign speech occurs through interaction by adjusting the speech to the child's needs, checking comprehension, explaining, paraphrasing, etc.

**Output** represents the active speech of children in a foreign language. The conclusions of Finnish scientists prove that ignoring output as a means of forming foreign language speaking competence in middle preschool-aged children results in limiting this competence to passive understanding of foreign speech [45]. Thus, the conditions of the language environment that influence the formation of foreign language communicative competence include, in particular, the presence or absence of the opportunity for children to engage in active foreign language speech, the existence of practices within the environment to encourage children to speak, and consideration of the silent period.

**Feedback**, which represents receiving a response regarding one's foreign language speech, is a means for children to check the correctness of their speech with subsequent correction of errors and reorganization of their language knowledge. The characteristics of feedback as a condition of the language environment are defined by its general presence or absence in the child's surroundings, as well as the predominance of positive or negative feedback [44], with the former demonstrating a positive attitude towards the child's foreign language speech (e.g., praise) and the latter involving direct correction of mistakes in the child's speech. In the field of preschool pedagogy, the predominant approach is to subtly correct mistakes in children's foreign language speech, such as through paraphrasing what the child has said and asking questions to elicit the correct form of expression.

5) Motivational conditions are a combination of external and internal factors that encourage a child to acquire foreign language communicative competence. In relation to middle preschool-aged children, the practice of using play, the leading activity of children, as a motivation for acquiring foreign language communicative competence is widespread, i.e., play-based motivation. In addition, several scholars emphasize the importance of using natural motivation for middle preschool-aged children to acquire a foreign language: the need to understand the world, satisfy needs, and, consequently, the necessity to be understood; communication with peers and adults [36, 46].

The above has allowed for the formulation of the concept of the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool-aged children.

**The language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool-aged children** is a combination of spatial, subject-related, communicative-linguistic, motivational conditions, and conditions of the material world, under which the formation of foreign language communicative competence occurs, and which, in their totality and interaction, ensure and determine this formation.

## 7. Perspectives for further research

Further research on the formation of foreign language communicative competence in children of middle preschool age should focus on the development of specific methods for creating a linguistic environment as a means of such formation in the context of preschool educational institutions in Ukraine. It should also involve determining the effective conditions for this environment, taking into account regional features of acquiring a specific foreign language and the peculiarities of learning and mental activities of children of middle preschool age.

## 8. Conclusions

Thus, the language environment as a means of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool-aged children is a set of conditions under which foreign language communicative competence is formed and which serve as the means for such formation. These conditions include spatial, subject, communicative, motivational, and object-world conditions. The appropriate construction of these conditions, taking into account their relationship and interaction in a preschool educational institution, determines the effectiveness of forming foreign language communicative competence in middle preschool-aged children.

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