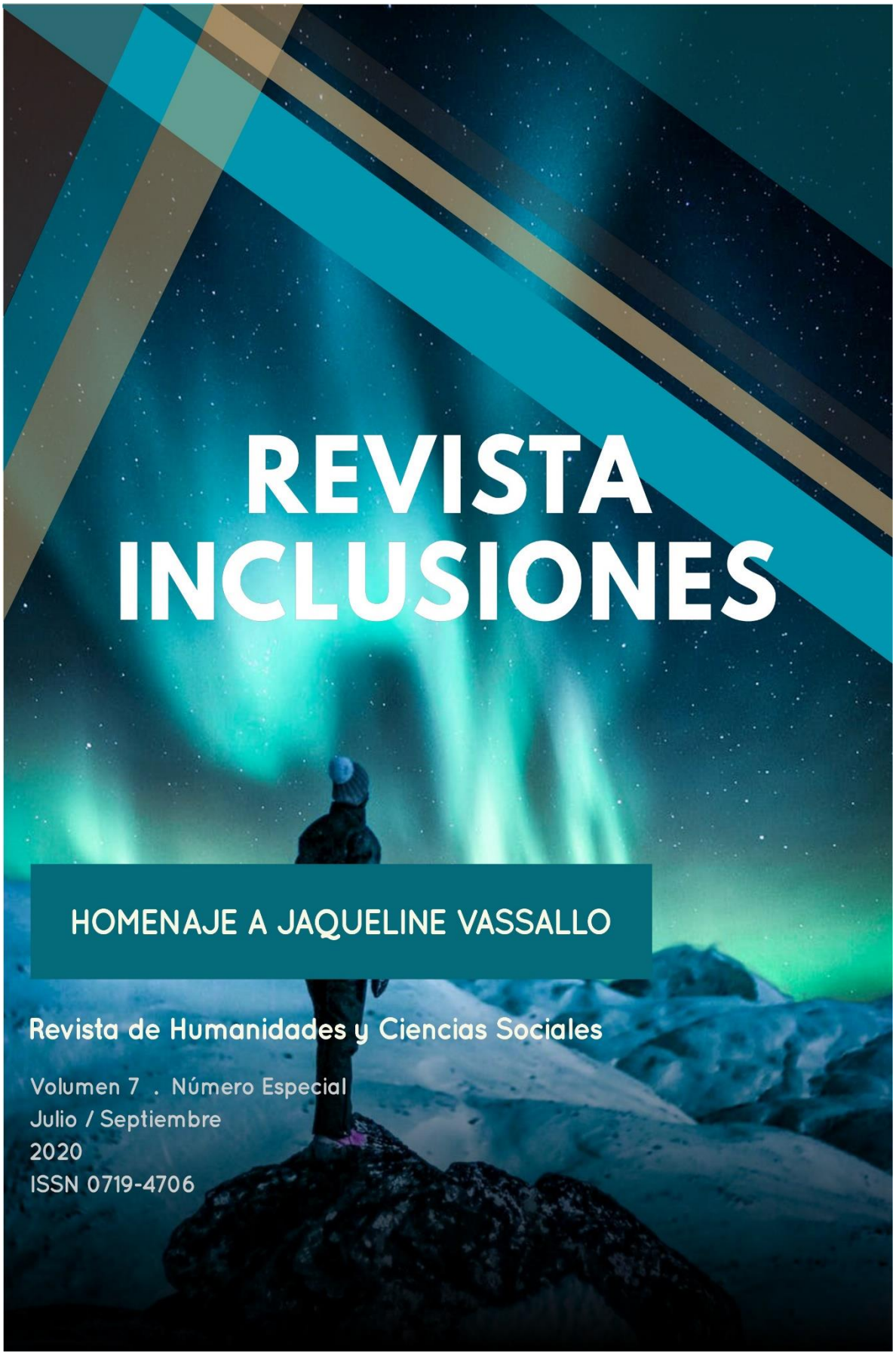

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THE SPECIFICS OF DISTANCE METHODOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The article reveals the essence and linguodidactic potential of distance methodological support for language teachers. Reviews of available scientific literature and existing courses show that, being in a foreign language environment, teachers need additional methodological support. In order to achieve this particular goal it is proposed to create a mechanism for developing innovative means of distance methodological support based on the Universarium open digital educational system, which has great potential in the field of information technology. This digital platform is the basis for developing a training portal, consisting of the following sections: (1) Forming the learning path (adaptational component); (2) Improving professional skills (educational component); (3) Providing consultancy and methodological support (consultative and adjusting component); (4) Teacher's personal account (resulting component); (5) Discussing professional issues (interactive component); and (6) Distance methodological support service module (coordination and technological component). The portal efficiency was confirmed by an experiment.

Keywords

Distance methodological support – Universarium open digital educational system
Distance training of foreign language teachers – Foreign language environment

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Introduction

Currently, distance learning is actively used in many countries for educational purposes, involving information technologies that open up real opportunities for building an educational system based on the principles of open information space. The open educational system is based on the global information infrastructure, which involves all members of the world community in the educational process. In the open education system, all the features of the new educational paradigm based on the principles of continuity ('lifelong education') and individualisation of learning appear in a natural way.

Distance learning makes it possible to flexibly respond to meeting the needs of people who are not able to study on an intramural basis. Distance learning is defined as "planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements"[1]. The researchers emphasise the fact that people prefer distance learning for the convenience, flexibility and adaptability of this mode of education to suit individual students' needs[2]. The term 'distance education' includes other types of learning and teaching, for example, open learning, distributed learning or networked learning.

The category of distance education extends to foreign language teachers, namely, those living and working abroad in territorial distance from scientific schools leading in the field of foreign language teaching methods, who often experience the need for operational methodological assistance to solve professional and pedagogical problems. In this regard, it seems especially important to provide methodological support to teachers working abroad on the basis of new achievements in pedagogy and linguodidactics integrating innovative pedagogical and information technologies, methods and tools. Such support can certainly be provided not only remotely. However, distance learning technologies, in our opinion, will be optimal in organising and implementing methodological support for teachers in a foreign language environment.

Literature review

Reviews of the content of scientific articles show that researchers, describing the specifics of distance training of foreign language teachers focus on technologies and genres that these teachers should be able to teach.

Various foreign language teaching technologies related to distance learning are described in a number of works, for example: *course management*: webCT [3]; Blackboard [4];

[1] M. Moore y G. Kearsley, Distance education: A systems view of online learning (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2011).

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[3] K. Murda; E. Ushida, A.N. Chenoweth, "Learners' and teachers' perspectives on language online", Computer Assisted Language Learning, Vol: 21 num 2 (2008): 130.

[4] P. D. Ware y C. Kramsch, "Toward an intercultural stance: Teaching German and English through telecollaboration", The Modern Language Journal, num 89 (2005) y D. J. Young, "An empirical

Moodle[5]; *conferencing*: Skype, Visu[6], Lyceum[7];*web 2.0 applications* Concept Tracker[8]; UdeC English Online[9], "Online pedagog assistant"[10]; Second life[11].

If we analyse research articles on distance education of teachers in terms of thematic foci, we will have the following results: *blended delivery*; telecollaboration[12]; *face-to-face comparison*[13];; *online tutorial practice*[14]; *teachers' challenges* [15]. Regarding the methodology of teaching foreign languages, it should be noted that foreign universities provide courses for teachers of English, for example, "Teach English now! Teach English online", "Moi Prof de FLE", "Short Film in language teaching", "Professional practices for English language teaching", "How to create lessons using Clilstore", "Methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language". They all have a standard structure. Each module of any of these courses begins with an introductory video lecture, after which it is necessary to study additional material and do some training tasks. Then, trainees are supposed to do tasks to assess their abilities and skills. The platform onto which these courses are uploaded provides feedback if necessary or if the tasks proposed by the course authors require it.

investigation of the effects of blended learning on student outcomes in a redesigned intensive Spanish course", CALICO Journal, Vol: 26 num 1 (2008).

[5] W. M. Hsieh y H.C. Liou, "A case study of corpus-informed online academic writing for EFL graduate students", CALICO Journal, Vol: 26 num 1 (2009) y I. Madyarov, "Designing a workable framework for evaluating distance language instruction". CALICO Journal, Vol: 26 num 2 (2009): 290-308.

[6] N. Guichon, "Preparatory study for the design of a desktop videoconferencing platform for synchronous language teaching", Computer Assisted Language Learning, Vol: 13 num 2 (2010): 170.

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[10] C. Brudermann, "From action research to the implementation of ICT pedagogical tools: Taking into account students' needs to propose adjusted online tutorial practice", ReCALL, Vol: 22 num 2 (2010): 172–190.

[11] M. Deutschman; L. Panichi y J. Molka-Danielsen, "Designing oral participation in Second Life – A comparative study of two language proficiency courses", ReCALL, Vol: 21 num 2 (2009): 206-226.

[12] O. Basharina; M. Guardado y T. Morgan, "Negotiating differences: Instructors' reflections on challenges in international telecollaboration", The Canadian Modern Language Review / La revue canadienne des langues vivantes, Vol : 65 num 2 (2008) y P. D. Ware y C. Kramsch, "Toward an intercultural stance: Teaching German and English through telecollaboration", The Modern Language Journal, num 89 (2005): 190–205 y P. D. Ware y C. Kramsch, "Toward an intercultural stance: Teaching German and English through telecollaboration", The Modern Language Journal, num 89 (2005): 190–205.

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[14] Brudermann, "From action research to the implementation of ICT pedagogical tools: Taking into account students' needs to propose adjusted online tutorial practice", ReCALL, Vol: 22 num 2 (2010): 172–190.

[15] O. Basharina; M. Guardado y T. Morgan, "Negotiating differences: Instructors' reflections on challenges in international telecollaboration". The Canadian Modern Language Review / La revue canadienne des langues vivantes, Vol : 65 num 2 (2008): 300.

The above courses are effective resources for foreign language teachers who continue their education. However, if teachers are in a foreign language environment, we think that their training should represent a more holistic system, taking into account their needs and allowing them to develop individual educational trajectories by creating matrices of subject areas, certification matrices, etc.

This holistic system of distance methodological support for teachers of foreign languages was developed by the authors of this article and implemented in the information environment of the Universarium digital platform. Now we shall present a brief description of this system and its effectiveness.

More than 1,600,000 people are currently studying at more than 300 Universarium online courses. According to Similar Web, about 700,000 people visit the open digital education system every month. According to surveys, its main advantages include a wide range of educational courses, regular updating of educational content, a large number of applications (including mobile ones), an active community in social networks, and cooperation with leading media projects.

An important feature of this platform is that today it includes a diagnostic system of professional competencies and advanced training, addressed to teachers of primary, secondary and high schools, as well as vocational education systems of the Russian Federation. In relation to the training of foreign language teachers, an automated system has been developed for diagnosing knowledge, abilities and skills of the subjects of the educational process and controlling the formation of their individual educational trajectories.

The resources of Universarium are targeted and differentiated, they are designed and developed with a focus on the goals and needs of the target audience, based on large-scale monitoring studies conducted by platform specialists together with leading educational organisations and specialised centres.

Universarium has great potential in the field of information technology. It was built on the basis of an open source CMS/CMF system; therefore, it was possible, on a convergent basis, to create specialised forms and tools of distance methodological support for teachers of Russian language as foreign working outside Russia.

The design of the system involved such modern technologies as CakePHP, Symfony, AngularJS, Content Distribution Network (CDN); integration with mail services was provided. For accounting and control of users, the BigData technology was applied. The digital platform was adapted for all modern devices and resolutions; iOS and Android applications were created.

In order to implement distance methodological support for teaching RFL in the Universarium open digital educational system, we have developed a specialised tool, i.e. an Internet portal.

The use of modern technologies made it possible, firstly, to aggregate on a single portal all the resources necessary to provide distance methodological support for teaching RFL, secondly, to develop innovative organisational forms and means for its implementation and, thirdly, to attract all the necessary resources of the basic digital platform, i.e. Universarium.

The portal consists of the following sections: (1) Forming the learning path (adaptational component); (2) Improving professional skills (educational component); (3) Providing consultancy and methodological support (consultative and adjusting component); (4) Teacher's personal account (resulting component); (5) Discussing professional issues (interactive component); and (6) Distance methodological support service module (coordination and technological component).

Let us describe in more detail Section 1 (Forming the learning path), since the content and mechanism of operation of this component are new in the distance learning system and are described in the methodology of teaching RFL for the first time.

Section 1. Forming the learning path. The development of individual learning paths begins with the formation of a teacher's profile. For this purpose, an electronic registration card is filled out with personal, professional and other information important for organising distance methodological support. Next, the primary diagnosis of professionally significant knowledge, abilities and skills of a teacher is carried out. Based on the revealed deficiencies, the teacher is recommended training courses or their individual modules, additional professional and educational resources of the platform intended to eliminate the deficiencies and packaged into a single (individual for each teacher) learning path. Therefore, the key module in this section is Diagnosing professional and pedagogical competences of teachers of RFL. This module contains the necessary resources for initial, intermediate and final diagnoses of the level of teachers' knowledge, abilities and skills.

In accordance with the main scenarios of distance methodological support for teachers, we have developed two types of diagnostic cards. The Competence Diagnostic Map of a teacher of RFL includes several dozens (usually 20–30) of situational methodological problems grouped into units according to the types of competences being tested. Each diagnostic unit is limited in time (10–15 minutes), its results are calculated and automatically presented to the teacher immediately after the test. It is possible to make a detailed analysis of the diagnostic material from which the result of each competence is compiled. The results are calculated as a percentage: from 0% to 100%. They are also presented in the form of graphs indicating the values in numerical terms. The results are grouped as follows: The results are grouped as follows: a) the deficiency level (0–49%), presented graphically as the red zone; b) the average level (result 50–79%): the yellow zone; c) the high level (80–100%): the green zone.

Methodology

Participants

The experimental group of teachers was formed by the authors of this article from among the teachers-philologists working in the Arab countries attending the courses of the Universarium open digital educational system (15 persons). The control group included teachers (15 persons) who also worked in the Arab countries but were trained in continuing education courses in the cities of Beirut and Byblos (Lebanon), and Damascus (Syria) according to traditional programmes. The groups were formed as described below. The experimental groups of students and teachers were made up based on the analysis of electronic registration cards issued by users of the Universarium digital platform.

The control groups of students and teachers were selected based on interviews (a) with Syrian citizens attending Russian language courses at the Russian Centre for Science and Culture (RCSC) in Damascus; and (b) with teachers working in the cities of Beirut and Byblos (Lebanon), and Damascus (Syria), and undergoing training in Beirut and Damascus.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was carried out in several stages:

The diagnostic stage — conducting an ascertaining experiment: initial diagnostics, i.e. determining the level of teachers' professional and pedagogical competence. In the process of measuring the initial level of teachers' professional competence, specially developed Diagnostic Cards were used, which included situational methodological tasks.

The implementation stage — conducting a formative experiment. A detailed analysis was carried out in the experimental group in order to identify the abilities and skills that the teachers lacked. The main deficiencies were found in the level of the teachers' methodological competence regarding the teaching of grammar and phonetics as well as the use of multimedia technologies in teaching Russian as a foreign language. Based on the received data, optimal online courses and their modules were selected. Before the training began, a webinar was held for the testees included in the experimental group, during which the authors of the study briefly acquainted them with the results that they obtained from the initial diagnostics, the main difficulties and the further strategy for working together. Further, tutors-consultants using the resources of the Universarium platform, based on the coordinated individual learning paths, developed an individual training program for each participant.

The control and assessment stage included: (a) conducting a final diagnosis, i.e. determining the level of the teachers' professional and pedagogical competence after training, identifying the dynamics and the degree of its development ('competence growth') in the experimental and control groups; and (b) assessing the effectiveness of distance methodological support for teachers in the development of professionally significant competences by comparing the results of the initial and final diagnoses and correlating them with the results obtained in the control group. At the end of the experimental work, a final assessment was carried out on the individual learning paths. To this end, the diagnostic cards were used, which contained situational tasks of the same level of complexity as for the summative assessment.

Results and discussion

The initial diagnostics (Fig. 1) showed that the testees in both groups had approximately the same level of professionally significant competences. Its results also testified to the fact that, to the least extent, the testees in both groups had the abilities and skills forming methodological competence.

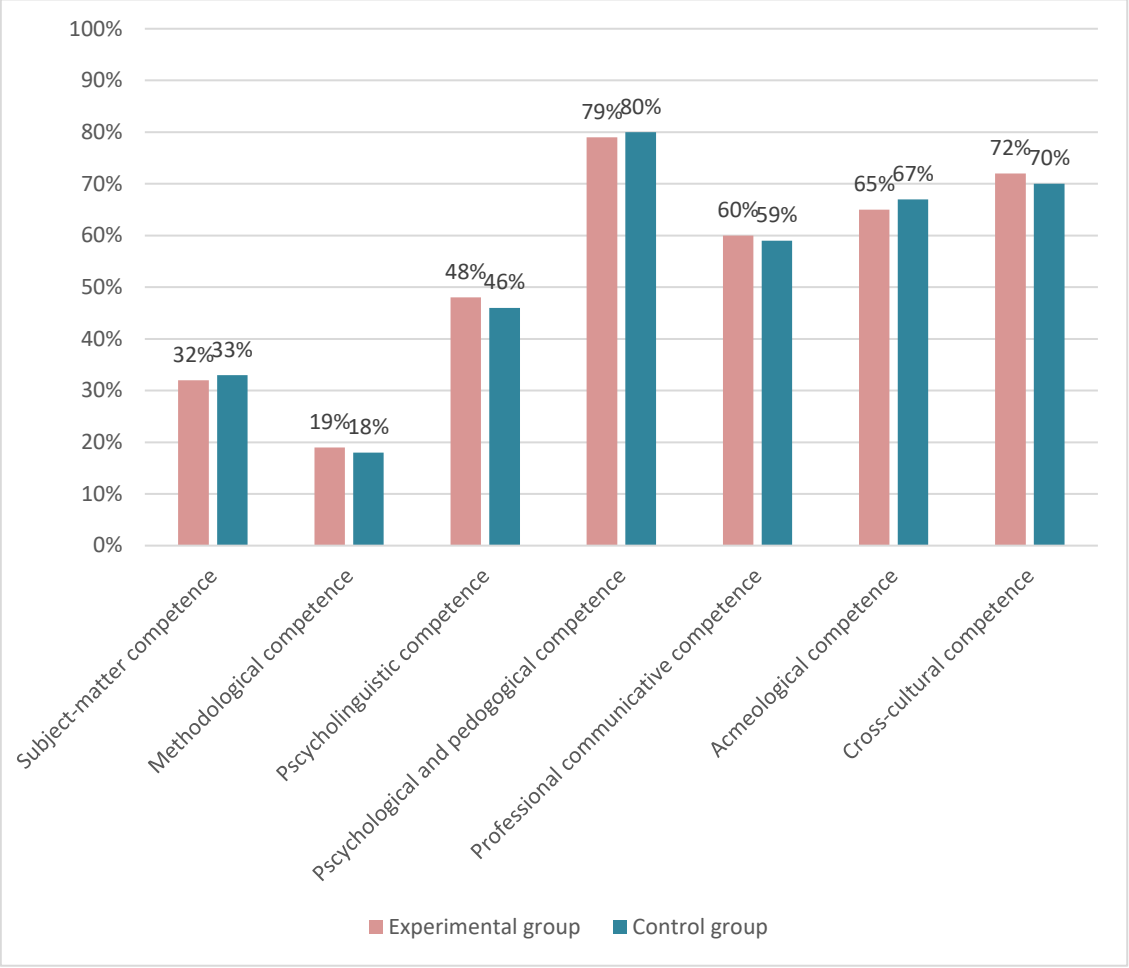

Fig. 1
The results of the initial competence diagnosis of testees in the experimental and control groups

At the end of the experimental work, a final assessment was carried out on the individual learning paths (Fig. 2). To this end, the diagnostic cards were used, which contained situational tasks of the same level of complexity as for the summative assessment. The final diagnosis showed that the results in the experimental group are significantly higher than in the control group.

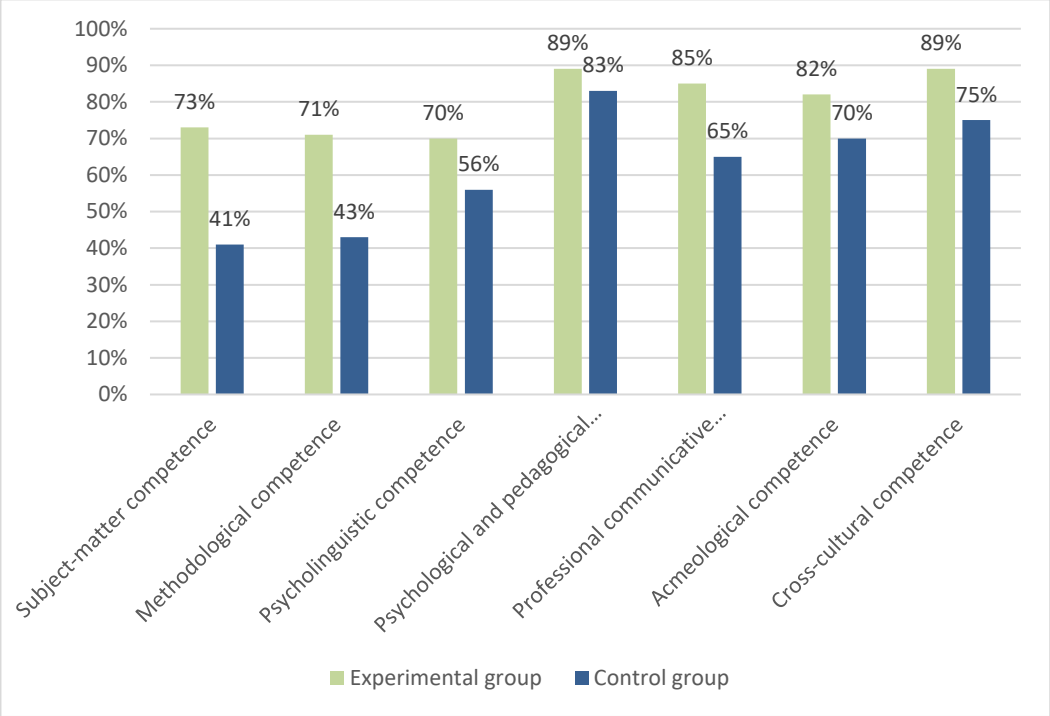

Fig. 2
The results of the final competence diagnosis of testees in the experimental and control groups

At the end of the training, the teachers were asked to express their attitude in the form of short reviews on the quality of distance methodological support. Here are some of them: The distance methodological support was well organised and conducted at a high level. The teachers and consultants were amiable, friendly and always contactable. The information embedded in the path was relevant, useful, focused on the practical work of teachers of RFL in the classroom simplicity of working with the platform resources did not cause any difficulties. In addition, among the advantages of distance methodological support, the testees noted the opportunity to study the materials for each unit independently at a convenient time for themselves; the clarity of task definitions: correct final tasks aimed at checking only what was studied in the course; the interactivity as a tool for reflection of learning; and the interconnectedness of theoretical and practical material. Thus, the results of the experimental work allow us to draw a conclusion about the effectiveness of the proposed system of distance methodological support for teachers of Russian as a foreign language in the absence of an authentic language environment.

Conclusions

The system of distance methodological support for teachers of RFL working in foreign countries was developed and implemented in the information environment of the Universarium open digital educational system (platform). The choice of the environment of this platform is due to the many years of experience of the Universarium team in organising methodological support for various categories of users: students, teachers, heads of educational organisations and other categories of subjects of educational activity, including those living in countries of near and far abroad.

The system of distance methodological support provides an opportunity for teachers of RFL working in a foreign language environment to continuously improve their skills, quickly receive methodological assistance, and use any necessary linguistic and educational resources; important features of the system are its differentiation and individualisation; the system also makes it possible to attract the best teaching staff from the supporting side, and ensures the autonomy of the target audience's activity.

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