

## **SOCIOLINGUISTIC CREDO OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER: THE CASE OF DIGITAL CLASSROOM**

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**Abstract.** The last two years saw a dramatic increase in the use of digital classrooms due to the new pandemic realities. Internet platforms and social networks offer teachers many options for interacting with their students and colleagues. Online communication differs from face-to-face communication in many aspects and for linguadidactic purposes should be reconsidered from a sociolinguistic point of view. The aim of the study is to explore sociolinguistic aspects of teachers' nature in online intercultural communication. The study relies on a questionnaire and interviews to collect data about students' level of sociolinguistic awareness, their ideas about professional online interaction, and their views on sociolinguistic difficulties. The research provides a comparative analysis of the sociolinguistic competence status in Russian and European methodology. The paper introduces the list of internal and external features that influence interlocutors' sociolinguistic behavior during intercultural communication online. The results suggest that there are a lot of digital factors that determine the communication outcome. The term "sociolinguistic credo" and its definition are presented. It is admitted that external and internal peculiarities should be taken into account in order to train future foreign language teachers effectively. There should be equality of cultures, especially on the Internet where it is easy to lose all cultures behind avatars.

**Keywords:** digital education; inner culture; intercultural communication; online professional education; sociolinguistic peculiarities

### **Introduction**

Contemporary foreign language education sets as its main priority students' training for intercultural communication with representatives of different linguistic communities. The cultural component has become the core element of teaching foreign languages instead of the linguistic component as it used to be not long ago. It is stated that language environment is not only the environment of words that denote something; it is mostly the environment of meanings that prescribe

rules of behavior to active interaction participants (Bokova & Milovannova 2020) so it means that different people behave according to their cultural experience and mostly their internal characteristics. The teaching process should be focused on a learner's culture and the culture of a language that s/he studies. These two cultures interact closely with the student's personality in order to form its special qualities that ensure the effectiveness of interaction with a representative of another linguistic society in various conditions of intercultural communication. It contributes to the process of solving various issues of professional and/or cultural socialization (Tareva 2018; Ivanova & Tivyaeva 2015). Intercultural communication becomes more complicated and develops every year due to the constantly changing environment. A striking example is the pandemic (Covid-19), which has transferred most of the international cooperation and international contacts to the Internet.

The sphere of education is one of the few spheres that was able to continue its work through remote technologies and carry out the process of interaction of teachers with students and their parents, colleagues, etc. (see, for instance, Tivyaeva & Vodyanitskaya 2021). Moreover, more opportunities for business communication have appeared, a lot of new teachers' unions have been created where teachers can provide methodological support to each other, social networks are used more frequently, and a number of events (conferences, webinars, etc.) were not canceled, they were transferred to different Internet platforms. It is important to note that the distant form of communication retains all the same rules of intercultural communication as face-to-face interaction while adding new requirements to online behavior.

The problem of the formation of sociolinguistic competence is not new for the methodology of teaching foreign languages. For the first time, sociolinguistic competence became part of foreign-language communicative competence in the 1980s, when Michael Canale and Merrill Swain faced the task of developing the components of foreign language communicative competence, which could later be used in the scale of assessment of the level of foreign language proficiency. The analysis of the works of foreign researchers shows that sociolinguistic aspects of teaching a foreign language have always worried scientists, but the researchers do not have a unified approach to terminology, so there are such terms as "transactional competence" by R.T. Bell (1976); A.D. Cohen and E. Olshtain (1981) deal with the term "sociocultural competence"; H.H. Thomas (1983) uses "sociopragmatic competence" and N. Wolfson (1989) works with "sociolinguistic relativity, all of these terms duplicate in their essence the specifics of sociolinguistic competence in the interpretation of academics who deal with this issue e.g. in the papers by M. Canale (1983), H.D. Brown (1987), E. Tarone and G. Yule (1987), etc. Nevertheless, the researchers share the same idea that this ability entails the processing of both linguistic as well as social

and cultural knowledge that serves to react in a culturally acceptable way and to choose stylistically appropriate linguistic forms in the given situation.

In the focus of European language-educational documents, the profile of sociolinguistic competence presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has consistently changed. In the first version of the publication (2001), a four-component model of communicative competence was presented, where sociolinguistic competence was highlighted as an integral component. Subsequently, the role of sociolinguistic competence has remained the same and strengthened, which is reflected in the last published version of CEFR (2020), in which sociolinguistic parameters are found in other scales (mediation, plurilingual and pluricultural competencies). This competence becomes especially relevant with the addition of signing competencies in CEFR because it is the competence that recognizes the sociolinguistic characteristics of people belonging to a certain social group. According to CEFR, sociolinguistic matters are linguistic markers of social relations; politeness conventions; register differences; and dialect and accent. CEFR offers a scale of “sociolinguistic appropriateness” that also includes performing language functions in an appropriate way, acting according to the interlocutor(s) expectations without requiring them to behave differently; recognizing sociocultural cues; adopting an appropriate register (CEFR 2020).

A comparative analysis of the approaches of Russian and foreign researchers to the definition of the essence of sociolinguistic competence in foreign and Russian methods allowed us to draw a number of interesting conclusions. In the Russian methodology of teaching foreign languages, the issue of the formation of sociolinguistic competence gained popularity in the early 2000s, although Russian linguists had previously thought about the relationship between language and social status, A.D. Schweitzer and L.B. Nikolsky (1978), V.I. Karasik (1991), etc. Returning to the methodological aspect of the problem, it is worth noting that the status of sociolinguistic competence differs significantly in the Russian methodology, since Russian methodologists V.V. Safonova (1993) and I.L. Bim (2002) distinguish sociolinguistic competence as part of sociocultural competence, unlike foreign scientists. The latter distinguish sociolinguistic competence as an autonomous component of foreign language communicative competence.

As noted earlier, sociolinguistic competence has a vivid social orientation, so the specifics of this competence vary among representatives of different social groups. This article focuses on teachers of foreign languages to consider the sociolinguistic aspect of intercultural communication, in which the specialists of this group participate. In this study, we will consider the features of the sociolinguistic competence of a modern teacher in the conditions of mass digitalization.

This article aims to consider the sociolinguistic features of teachers' intercultural communication in the digital focus. To achieve this goal, the following tasks will be solved:

- point out sociolinguistic peculiarities of digital professional communication that FL teachers face and analyse various examples of educators' professional interaction on the Internet;
- present the results of the survey of senior students (intending English teachers) aimed at identifying their level of sociolinguistic awareness of professional intercultural communication;
- make a list of parameters of a sociolinguistic credo of a modern FL teacher in the digital classroom.

### Methods

The research relies on theoretical studies in the fields of language education to clarify the role of sociolinguistic competence in teachers' training and reveal peculiarities of teachers' sociolinguistic credo in the case of digitalization. The study attempts to find out the intending teachers' level of sociolinguistic awareness whether they admit its necessity for their future work or not. For this purpose, a special survey is conducted. The 72 senior students (intending English teachers) of Moscow City University have been addressed the following questions: *How often does a FL teacher have to engage in cross-cultural professional communication on the Internet? What is the most popular way of professional online interaction for FL teachers? Do your FL teachers prepare you for intercultural communication through the sociolinguistic aspect? Do you think it is necessary to consider the sociolinguistic aspect of language? How would you assess your sociolinguistic competence for professional communication? What sociolinguistic difficulties can a FL teacher face when communicating with a foreign colleague online? Have you ever faced sociolinguistic difficulties?* The results of the questionnaire are presented in the next section.

### Results

Digital Classroom gives a FL teacher many opportunities to prepare students for intercultural communication, that is why we share the idea that a digital educator creates a learning environment in the classroom that provides the opportunity for students to develop both academic skills and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills (Mashhadi & Kargozari 2011, p. 1180). A foreign language lesson allows students to develop the skills of the 21st century, but in this paper, we will focus in more detail on communication and collaboration as important components of intercultural communication. An ability to communicate properly is an important skill for students as they should be equipped for interaction for various purposes and in different situations and environments, including multilingual contexts (Klimas & Baran-Lucarz 2020). The ability to collaborate emerges from the ability to build communication effectively. First of all, a teacher must have these skills in order to become a model for his/her students. The specific features of the digital classroom determine a new type of teacher-student interaction as it reaches a new level.

In a digital classroom, it is possible to communicate in written (chats, e-mail, social networks) and oral ways (meetings, webinars, etc.). Teachers' professional online communication, as well as face-to-face communication, has sociolinguistic features, therefore, while communicating on the Internet, it is necessary to be able to decode the image of the interlocutor. In this article, we will define the set of sociolinguistic characteristics (internal and external factors) inherent in a person, which determine his/her behavior in the process of intercultural communication, as the sociolinguistic credo. The next aim is to present what parameters determine the sociolinguistic credo of a foreign language teacher. Firstly, it is the tools through which the lesson is carried out. Now, when distance or hybrid learning has become particularly popular, an increasing number of foreign language teachers conduct lessons through various Internet platforms and messengers (Zoom, MS Teams, Skype, Google Meetings, WhatsApp, etc.). Researchers note that social networks have the potential to enhance EFL learners' language proficiency (Nugroho et al. 2020). Each platform has different functionality and sets the language register. For example, messengers are less formal, so the language register during a conversation may be lower than during a Zoom meeting. The level of relations between communicants also determines the nature of online interaction. Thus, in written communication, people with more close relations may allow the use of emojis, but for a more formal conversation, this will be unacceptable.

Another distinctive feature of interaction on the Internet is the lack of privacy and full publicity. Any communication act can be recorded (a screen is made of written communication, a video recording of a fragment of a speech / online lesson, etc.). This leads to the fact that, unlike face-to-face communication, which is a one-time communicative event, online communication can be repeated any number of times with the participation of third parties. For example, most of lectures are recorded so that students can return to any moment they don't understand and listen to them again. Such publicity can provoke online communication participants to change their own sociolinguistic behavior, adapting to the generally accepted general framework, which in some cases may completely overlap their views on the world, which complicates the task of the speech partner to see the real sociolinguistic credo of their interlocutor. In some cases, such publicity can slow down the relationship between a teacher and a student, since both may feel uncomfortable because at some moments the teacher shares his/her own experience to achieve educational goals, and with a large online audience or when recording online communication participants may be afraid to reveal some personal facts. With all the lack of privacy in the modern educational online space, one can encounter the opposite phenomenon of the anonymity "avatar" (Tareva 2021). This phenomenon is characterized by the desire of the participant in the educational process to hide his essence without providing his speech partner with basic information about his personality (not to turn on the camera in an online lesson), which can also lead to

difficulties in establishing a dialogue of cultures. The main goal of digitalization is to expand the boundaries of educational opportunities, so online education should not serve as a burden for teachers and students, but on the other hand, it tries to aid the learning and teaching process to be more effective (Sugianto 2020). The teacher faces several tasks: to establish a trusting level of relations with the student so that s/he turns on the camera during class and to create a positive online atmosphere so that students do not turn it off during the lesson. To solve these problems, the teacher needs to analyze the sociolinguistic and psychological portrait of his/her student, but it is worth starting first of all with the portrait of the teacher himself/herself.

Summarizing the reflections mentioned above, we will present the external parameters that affect the process of interaction between a teacher and a student in a digital classroom: an Internet platform, the level of trust between a teacher and a student, the type of interaction (lesson, individual consultation), the topic of the lesson, the time and duration of the lesson, the actual place of stay of the communicants. The way how the external parameters of the speech situation affect the behavior of the communicant is predetermined by the internal characteristics of the personality. Internal parameters are the core of the sociolinguistic credo. Taking into account what was said earlier, in this article we will divide these characteristics into two groups: personal and professional. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Internal parameters of the sociolinguistic credo  
of a foreign language teacher

Inner Characteristics	
Personal Characteristics	Professional Characteristics
Social status	Education level
Age	Languages
Gender	Place of work
Place of residence	Position
Psychological and physiological features	General professional experience
Emotional state at the moment of a speech situation	The level of professional and methodological competence in the field of linguodidactics (in particular, the ability to work in a digital classroom)
Personal beliefs	Professional beliefs

The listed parameters in Table 1 determine what influences a teacher in the process of interacting with students and colleagues in online and face-to-face interaction. The example of gender as an example of how communication between a female teacher and a male teacher can differ will be given. As A. Aridakh considers in his article, women tend to communicate in the style of rapport-talk, which

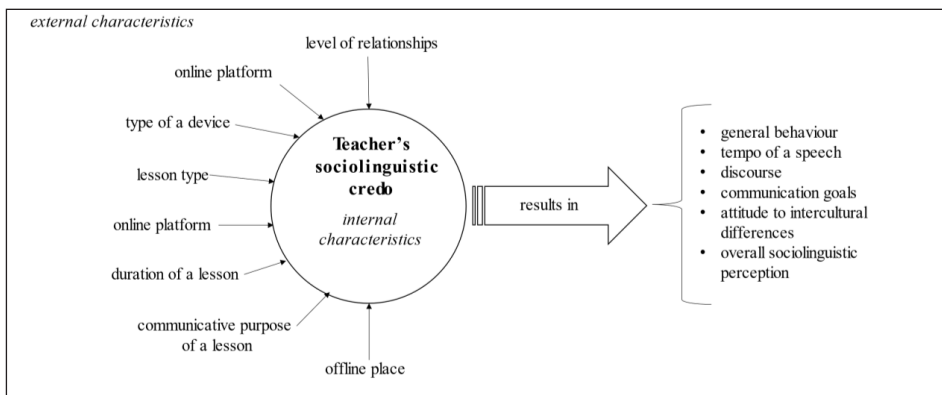
implies a calmer and trusting atmosphere, while men use report-talk, which implies a more strict and uncompromising form of interaction. Also, the female form of communication is characterized by more active listening strategies, unlike men. For teachers of a foreign language, this may be expressed in the fact that female teachers will more often use phrases such as: “I see”, “that’s right”, “continue, please” and various forms of interjections (Aridakh 2021).

From the list of professional characteristics, it is possible to consider how the place of work affects the teacher of a foreign language. A schoolteacher communicates with his/her students more informally and may allow a low register. A university professor in an academic environment communicates with students with a high register. The personality of the speech partner determines how communication will be built. Thus, the ability to analyze the addressee's sociolinguistic credo to anticipate his/her behavior and predict their reaction to the addressee's behavior is necessary for successful intercultural interaction. According to E.G. Tareva, A.A. Kazantseva, and B.V. Tarev, a successful communicative act means foreseeing the consequences desired by the addressee (linguistic and non-linguistic) to achieve the goal. Addressing assumes the function of influence as a “driving force” for further communication (Tareva et al. 2020). The way in which the sociolinguistic credo will be analyzed determines the further communicants' relationships and the outcome of their first communication in particular. It is also necessary to prepare students for the variability of professional discourse so that they have developed skills and strategies that will allow them to use tools typical of professional discourse (Vishnevetskaya and Solyanko 2020).

The combination of internal and external characteristics predetermines the process of intercultural communication between representatives of one or different cultures (Figure 1). The result of the interaction of the internal (personal and professional) nature of a person and externally specified factors affects the overall behavior of a person during communication and his/her reaction to the interlocutor. If communication takes place online, but in a video call mode, then a teacher's speech is affected by the need to repeat something several times or louder due to frequent Internet connection problems. If communication takes place without a camera, then a voice becomes a single tool for online interaction. The specificity of online communication also lies in the fact that the teacher's speech fills with phrases peculiar only to online communication: “You are muted; Share the content; Upload the file etc.” for offline communication situations, these phrases are not typical, because they are not relevant. For written communication with a trusting level of teacher-student relationships, the use of emojis or stickers may be allowed. Written communication on the Internet can be accompanied by such characteristics as compactness, speed, and lack of grammar and spelling rules, which determines the introduction and widespread use of new ways of writing



and use of nontraditional spelling forms, unusuality, verbal innovations, deliberate violation of norms, widespread use of abbreviations, including acronyms, so the teacher needs to be prepared and to such challenges, in some cases, the teacher will have to descend to the level of his student in order to convey the idea more clearly for his perception, in some cases, on the contrary, develop the student and teach him a higher register (Bagmanova et al. 2020). By considering all the external and internal factors of both another communicant and his/her own, the teacher develops a sociolinguistic sensitivity that will allow him/her to choose the appropriate behavior model and speech constructions that are necessary to be used in an online lesson.



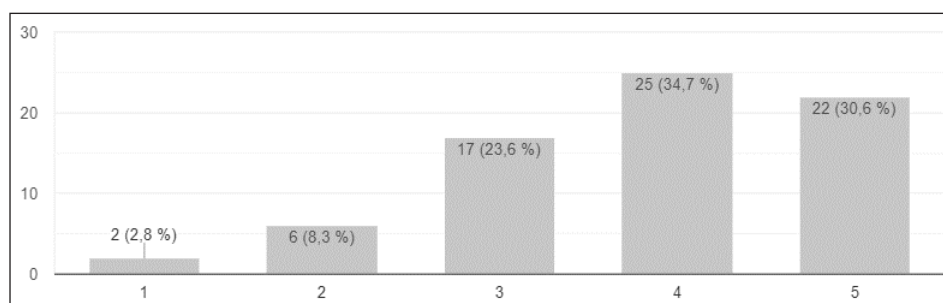
**Figure 1.** Consequences of the interaction of internal and external components of sociolinguistic credo

A foreign language teacher must build relationships with different people and representatives of different cultures. A distinctive feature of the activity of a foreign language teacher is the fact that s/he needs to teach language and culture at the same time. Focusing on the culture of the country of the language being studied, as E.G. Tareva and B.V. Tarev note, sometimes leads to the assignment by the students (often involuntary) the idea of another culture uniqueness, its exclusivity, and even superiority in comparison with the culture of their native country (Tareva & Tarev 2017, p. 435). Ethnocentrism and generalization of representatives of one culture are not allowed in foreign language lessons, which leads to a greater orientation towards the sociolinguistic nature of a person. The academics often express concern about such phenomena as Eurocentrism, although currently European languages are also used as a tool to interact with representatives of Eastern cultures (Ganesh et al. 2017). Sociolinguistic anticipation in this case can help to foresee the behavior model of the speech partner correctly, considering the culture of

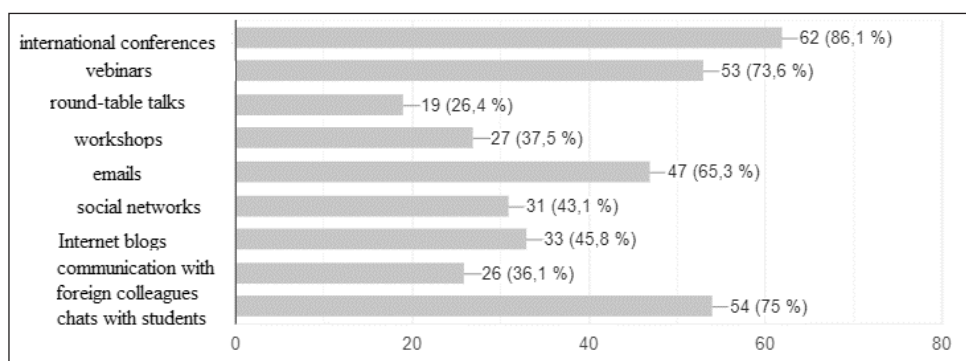


his/her country and his individual culture. More often, a foreign language is used by teachers and students who belong to the same linguistic society. As part of the communicative approach, foreign language teachers try to maintain an authentic atmosphere to create motivation for learning a foreign language. When a foreign language is not a native language for two participants of communication, it is advisable to analyze the sociolinguistic portrait of a person. There are well-known facts regarding the characteristics of female and male behavior, representatives of different age groups, which, regardless of their country of residence, may be similar due to the psychological characteristics of individuals.

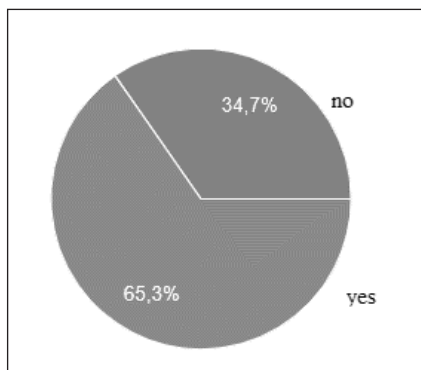
The next task of our research is to study the level of awareness of senior students about the necessity of taking into account sociolinguistic parameters in professional intercultural communication, how students perceive the communication of foreign language teachers online, and to find out how students evaluate their own sociolinguistic competence. The results are presented in diagrams:



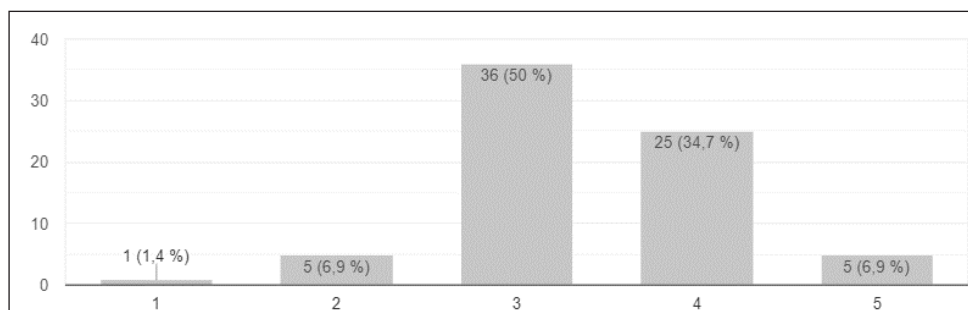
**Figure 2.** How often does a FL teacher have to engage in cross-cultural professional communication on the Internet? (1 stands for rare, 5 stands for always)



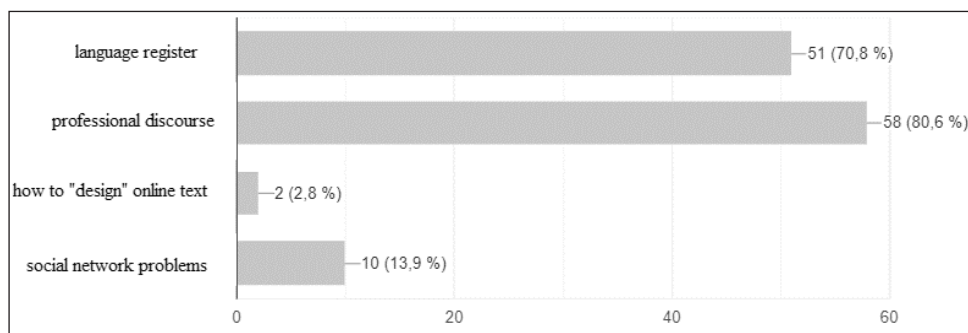
**Figure 3.** The most popular way of online professional interaction for teachers



**Figure 4.** Do your FL teachers prepare you for intercultural communication through the sociolinguistic aspect?



**Figure 5.** How would you assess your sociolinguistic competence for professional communication? (1 stands for poor, 5 stands for excellent)



**Figure 6.** What sociolinguistic difficulties can a FL teacher face when communicating with a foreign colleague online?

## **Discussion**

The next step of the research is to interpret the results of the above survey. According to Figure 2, we conclude that the students have an idea of how much they will have to conduct professional communication online in the future. If we take the indicators of the scale “3”, “4” and “5” together, it turns out 89%, which indicates that students are aware of the need for their own professional training for intercultural online dialogue. Such a high level of awareness of the problem by students is influenced by the current epidemiological situation, which forced students to transfer most of their contacts to the online space.

The results of Question 2, which are presented in Figure 3, demonstrate quite an obvious idea, but with a new from a sociolinguistic interpretation. Students believe that very often teachers communicate with them on work issues (75%). This is true; a teacher most often has to analyze the sociolinguistic credo of his/her students because of constant contact with them. Teachers interact with students in the (online) classroom more often than with colleagues at international conferences (86.1%), so it is important to take into account the affiliation of potential communicants to the status of students when preparing for sociolinguistic variability of intercultural communication. An interesting observation of students is that professional communication on social networks is at a low level (43%), this is due to the fact that social networks are perceived by students as a personal space in which the professional component is not the leading one. In general, the analysis of students' opinions shows that professional communication on the Internet, in their opinion, occurs more often orally than in writing.

The interpretation of the results of Figure 4 and Figure 5 will be presented together since the questions are partly interrelated. The fact that sociolinguistic competence in the Russian methodology is regarded as a sub-competence of sociocultural competence, as noted in the Introduction section, explains the fact that only 65% of teachers pay students' attention to the sociolinguistic aspect in the process of teaching foreign languages. Despite the fact that this is more than half of the respondents surveyed, this indicator is not high enough for effective preparation for intercultural communication, which leads to the fact that on a five-point scale, students assess their sociolinguistic competence as satisfactory (3 out of 5).

The next question is crucial since it allows to prioritize focus at preparing students for sociolinguistic variability (Figure 6). Students identify professional discourse as the most difficult thing in professional communication. Among the reasons for these difficulties, students note differences in the Russian and English terminological system in the field of foreign language teaching methodology (lack of equivalents of a number of terms, different interpretations of the same concept, etc.). The second common difficulty for students is choosing the right language register in accordance with the communicative situation, i.e., respondents are not ready to determine which language tools are suitable in this situation based

on external factors. This is due to the fact that even with a large vocabulary, students are not always sure of the additional connotation of vocabulary. Senior students are more focused on the linguistic aspect of sociolinguistic competence, without taking into account paralinguistic factors.

Thus, it is possible to find correspondences with the presented sociolinguistic credo of a foreign language teacher in Table 1 and the results of a survey of students, that confirmed the necessity to include these components in assessing the sociolinguistic image of communicants. Before modern methodology of teaching foreign languages, the question arises that it is necessary to prepare teachers for online interaction in an oral and written way admitting equality of internal and external culture.

### **Conclusion**

As the result of this study, on the basis of comparative analysis, it was possible to clarify the status of sociolinguistic competence in the Russian and foreign methodology of teaching foreign languages, which made it possible to identify the features of preparing specialists from different countries for intercultural communication, in particular in Russia. The paper presents the features of the Internet interaction of participants in the educational process, depending on the platform on which the interaction takes place and the speech situation. Positive and negative effects of distance interaction in foreign language education are noted. The internal and external factors that influence professional communication are considered, which made it possible to identify the components of the sociolinguistic credo of a foreign language teacher. The leading sociolinguistic skill for successful intercultural communication is the willingness to work with the sociolinguistic credo of the communicant in order to select appropriate communicative strategies and work on their own sociolinguistic credo so that in case of a mismatch of the behavior model expected by the communicant, they can explain the difference in sociolinguistic images of each other. The conducted survey of students has pointed out the place of the sociolinguistic aspect in teaching intending English teachers' foreign languages (using the example of MCU) and identified further prospects for research.

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