

Prospects and Practices of Enhancing Students' Linguistic Giftedness: the Kazakhstani Experience

Roza Zhussupova, L. N. Gumilyov ENU, Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan)

Zhanargul Beisembayeva, L. N. Gumilyov ENU, Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan)

Madeleine Danova, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria)

Roza Zhussupova, Zhanargul Beisembayeva, Madeleine Danova. PROSPECTS AND PRACTICES OF ENHANCING STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC GIFTEDNESS: THE KAZAKHSTANI EXPERIENCE

Abstract. The article discusses a small-scale experiment to examine the implementation of a strategic linguistic giftedness model with 12 pupils who have been chosen from a range of schools for gifted students during 12 weeks. The impact of this experimental study is to provide learning activities that cater for all gifted students' needs in the classroom and stimulate their linguistic giftedness and foreign language learning.

This article is an attempt to make an experimental analysis of some problems associated with enhancing linguistically gifted students in their learning of English. In this respect, the results can assist teachers and practitioners in the effective organization of the educational process, but most of all, the study is addressed to foreign language teachers who are responsible for the selection of English teaching strategies that build the methodically calibrated educational process. This article also presents a linguistic giftedness curriculum which consists of 12 separate curriculum blocks with a complex of extra-curricular activities for linguistically gifted students.

Keywords: linguistic giftedness, foreign language aptitude.

Роза Жусупова, Жанаргул Бейсембаева, Мадлен Данова. ПРАКТИКИ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ПРЕД ПОДОБРЯВАНЕТО НА ЛИНГВИСТИЧНАТА НАДАРЕНОСТ В СТУДЕНТИТЕ: КАЗАХСТАНСКАТА ПРАКТИКА

Резюме. Статията представя един малък по мащаб експеримент за оценяване на въвеждането на стратегически лингвистичен модел при 12 ученици, избрани от различни училища за надарени деца в продължение на 12 седмици. Целта на това експериментално изследване е да предостави на надарените деца обучителни дейности, които да отговарят на нуждите им и да стимулират техните лингвистични заложби и усвояването на чужд език.

Статията е и опит да се предложи експериментален анализ на някои от проблемите, свързани с подпомагането на лингвистично надарените деца при изучаването

на английски език. В този смисъл резултатите от проведеното изследване могат да са полезни на учителите и преподавателите в по-ефективната организация на обучителния процес, като най-вече изследването е предназначено за учителите по чужд език, които трябва да подбират стратегии за преподаване на английски език, които да осигурят методически обоснован обучителен процес. Тази статия също представя и програма за обучение на лингвистично надарени деца, която се състои от 12 отделни обучителни блока, придружени от комплекс от извънкласни дейности.

Ключови думи: лингвистична надареност, склонност към изучаване на чужди езици.

Research/Научно изследване

1. Introduction: Kazakhstan and Gifted Education

Ever since Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, it has been demonstrating growth in many aspects of life including education. In 1996, a Strategically important document was issued called “About the State Support and Development of Schools for Gifted Children”, which sets the tasks for creating conditions necessary for the education of gifted young people. In this document the special schools for gifted children are defined as “a type of comprehensive school, aimed at the teaching and training of children showing a wide range of intellectual abilities and special talents in different subjects” (Ministry of Education and Science; Decree of the President Nursultan Nazarbayev 1996).

Therefore, there is a special place for the promotion of giftedness among pupils and students in the Kazakhstani educational system. In recent years Astana has seen the emergence of western standard schools such as the Nazarbayev Intellectual School, International School Miras, the school for gifted children Zerde, the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceum, the international schools Nur Orda and Haileybury.

In 2011 Kazakhstan adopted the State Programme for Development and Functioning of Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011–2020 (President Nursultan Nazarbayev 2011). According to the Programme there are three languages in the country spoken by Kazakhstani citizens: Kazakh as a state (national) language, Russian as an official language used alongside Kazakh language, and English as an international language. Trilingual education has been launched in 33 schools for gifted children since 2007 (the Republican scientific and practical Center “Astana Daryny”).

2. Linguistic giftedness model in Kazakhstani setting

Giftedness is one of the most controversial notions in education (Berger 1991; Davletova 2012; Feldhusen 1991; Freeman 1998; Gagne 1995; Heller 1989; Faulkner 2003; Tadeyev 2008; Yakavets 2014; Mönks et al. 2005; Rybalka 2011; Howe 1990; Heller et al. 1993; Eysenck et al. 1993).

Hilary Faulkner in her work *Predicting Gifted Foreign Language Learning and Performance* denotes some controversies in the notion of giftedness based on the definitions of Porter and Howe: (Faulkner 2003: 78, 104).

Porter reflects on the diversity of definitions and points out that there is a lack of clarity. Although the notion of giftedness appears to be universal, its definition and a method of identification are actually more complex because differing ideologies and assumptions give rise to diversity and controversy in definition and consequently in assessment. Sternberg and Davidson comment: “Giftedness is something we invent, not something we discover: it is what one society or another want it to be” They suggest that giftedness is not a fixed construct but is somewhat arbitrary, dependent on political and psychological norms and how a society chooses where to demarcate between the average and the above average. (Faulkner 2003:78)

Quite a different angle of discussing giftedness is adopted by Howe and as Faulkner claims, Howe discusses whether giftedness is a concrete entity that some people possess and others do not. He asserts that genetic difference might have some influence and may impose limits on performance in certain intellectual feats in the same way as in physical feats. Yet he clarifies that: “the idea that genetic factors severely limit the success of individuals is false. (Faulkner 2003: 104)

For the purposes of this study, however, the most useful has turned to be the definition of giftedness as “not a fixed construct” provided by Sternberg and Davidson, which has opened a new perspective on giftedness. During the preparation period for conducting the experiment the critical assessment of the above-mentioned approaches to giftedness has helped to successfully identify gifted students as well as to test their performance throughout the course (ref. section 3 “Methods”).

With the fast and growing development in the world and society it is quite obvious that working with gifted students would require more means and more new techniques in education. The great advantage of Kazakhstani education is that it willingly turns to foreign educational experience and incorporates innovations and new tendencies in education which benefit our educational system. In the case of Kazakhstan, recent economic growth in the country prompted the technical improvement in education; there are more schools equipped with all necessary means to deliver appropriate education. Moreover, Kazakhstani educational institutions follow new trends in education, open access to foreign electronic libraries and strive to provide the best possible education.

The relevance of study is also connected to the fact already mentioned that in 2011 the government announced a three-language policy. It is a well-accepted fact nowadays that English has become a *Lingua Franca* and is spoken worldwide. Kazakhstan follows the same trend as many other countries have done in recognizing the importance of English and of gaining a native-like fluency in it. This is in close relation to the focus of this study on linguistic giftedness and foreign language aptitude.

There is an enormous amount of data on teaching English to gifted students including plenty of theoretical information, different approaches to giftedness, various models and techniques (Hsi-Chi Hsiao et al. 2014; Jeltova et al. 2005; Gardner 1983, 1985; Guildford 1959; Freeman 1998; Bialystok 1991; Kholodnaya 2007; Naiman et al. 1978; Pfeiffer 2008; Porter 1999; Renzulli 1986; O'Malley et al. 1990; Mitchell et al. 1998; Skehan 1989; Spolsky 1989; Nunan 2004; Ellis 2000; Vygotsky 1978). For the purposes of the present study, the most relevant work has been Golombek's article "A study of language teacher's personal practical knowledge", which acknowledges the existence of different language learners and thus serves to theoretically situate our study (Golombek 1998).

Initially, we have turned to the Multiple Intelligences theory by Howard Gardner (Gardner 1983) who first introduced the model of giftedness in 1983 in his book *Frames of Mind*. He distinguishes eight types of intelligence: musical–rhythmic, visual–spatial, verbal–linguistic, logical–mathematical, bodily–kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Gardner recognizes the existence of verbal-linguistic intelligence and that some students might show proclivities to learning languages including their native language more easily than other students. It is clear that the role of motivation is of a paramount importance. In 1985 Howard Gardner published his book *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning. The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. On the basis of his study, we included the role of motivation as a crucial component in English language classroom for linguistically gifted students. However, it is worth mentioning that motivation is needed in any type of a classroom. Thus, works of Howard Gardner have impacted our research and our perception of gifted students and their needs.

Another scholar whose work has very much influenced the work on this project, is Kurt Heller. His "Munich model of giftedness" is a great and elaborate portrait of how to work with gifted students (Heller 1989) (Figure 1). The majority of our theoretical foundation is based on his giftedness model. Heller distinguishes talent factors, non-cognitive personality characteristics, performance areas and environmental conditions in his giftedness model. Heller's definition of giftedness is defined as "the individual cognitive and motivational potential for – as well as social and cultural conditions of – achieving excellent performance in one or more area such as in mathematics, languages, or artistic areas with regard to difficult theoretical vs practical tasks" (Heller 1989:141). What we have concentrated on in our

linguistic giftedness model are the talent factors and performance area in languages omitting environmental conditions and non-cognitive personality characteristics described in Heller’s model.

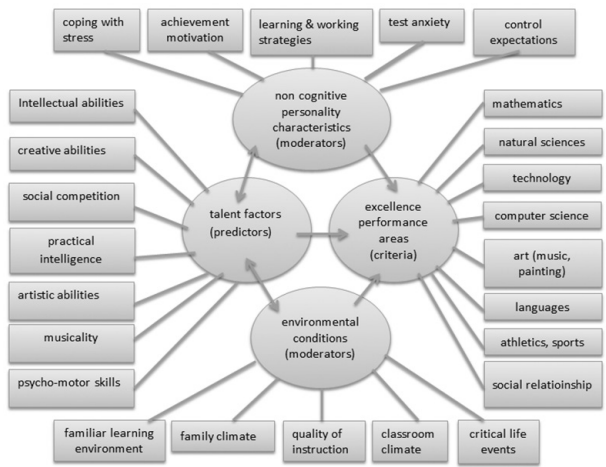


Figure 1. The Munich model of giftedness. K. Heller

Furthermore, we have intensified our research underpinnings by a more in-depth approach to giftedness turning to Fisher’s model of linguistic intelligence. It consists of metacognition, knowledge (learning input) and performance (linguistic output). The main point of this model is the development of four basic language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing (Fisher 1990) (Figure 2).

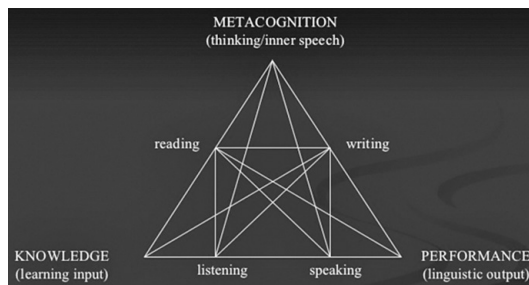


Figure 2. Fisher’s model of linguistic intelligence

Developing these four basic language skills is also known within the framework of the so-called Integrated approach. Our objective has been to integrate the

four-basic-skills approach in our study, i.e. to provide a full immersion into English language in the gifted classroom.

3. Methods

The great way of working with linguistically gifted students is in the opportunity to incorporate different strategies in the classroom. As the critical assessment of the theoretical studies of giftedness has shown, there are different theoretical approaches to giftedness. However, for the purposes of the present study, we consider it very important to be able to find appropriate ways of working with linguistically gifted students. Every individual is different, and when it has to do especially with gifted students, teachers must know how to deal with their peculiarities and particular qualities. Strategies that should be applied in the gifted classroom are the following: acceleration (J. VanTassel-Baska 2004; T. Southern & E. Jones 1991), differentiation (S.L. Berger 1991) and enrichment (J. Roberts 2004). These three strategies manifest our way of working with linguistically gifted students. To keep the students' interest active and their motivation high we have included the acceleration strategy into our model. Then, to see more progress in students' performance we have chosen the differentiation strategy, so that linguistically gifted students receive the right amount of exercises which correspond to their level and idiosyncrasies. The enrichment strategy has also become a necessary constituent in our experiment. Gifted students need the extra attention from teachers and at times an additional task from a teacher would boost a gifted student's confidence and motivation, i.e. the performance would get only better. Thus, we have called our model – “Strategic linguistic giftedness model” (Figure 3).

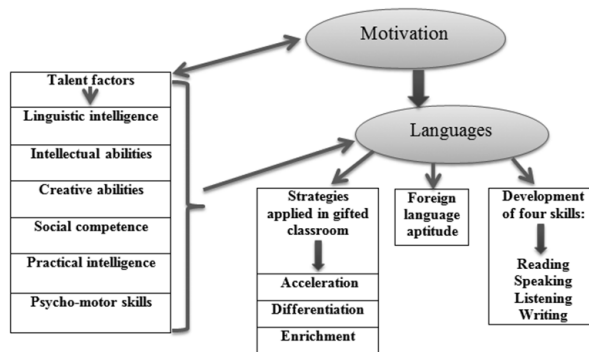


Figure 3. Strategic linguistic giftedness model
 (K. A. Heller, H. Gardner, R. Fisher, J. VanTassel-Baska, T. Southern & E. Jones,
 S. L. Berger, J. Roberts, J. Carroll)

Another significant component of our model is the concept of foreign language aptitude. This term was first introduced in 1955 by John B. Carroll in his book *Modern Language Aptitude Test* (Carroll, 1955). He distinguishes phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, rote learning ability, and inductive learning ability as great exponents of individual's language abilities. Carroll has developed "the MLAT" test in order to assess the language aptitude of adults, which has become a special part of our own research. The major steps in using it have been:

3.1. First of all, we had to test our students and only then, on the basis of the results obtained to move on to teaching them according to "the Strategic linguistic giftedness model". The curriculum has been specifically designed for testing the validity of "Strategic linguistic giftedness model" and consists of 12 curriculum blocks. The curriculum contains three English language proficiency tests, and those tests measure students' foreign language aptitude. In effect, we had to incorporate testing into our curriculum in order to be aware of students' progress throughout the course.

3.2. Then the foreign language aptitude can be enhanced and further developed which has also been one of the major purposes of our study. The results of the course have indicated that our students have gradually improved their "soft" spots in English language. As a matter of fact, when we have been planning the curriculum our goal has been to engage all students in the course in spite of slight differences in their level of English language proficiency.

3.3. Experiment in linguistically gifted classroom and implementation of "the Strategic linguistic giftedness model"

To prove the validity of the Strategic linguistic giftedness model, we have set up a 12 weeks experiment in a gifted classroom setting. To accomplish that experiment, we have created a special curriculum for linguistically gifted pupils which consists of 12 curriculum blocks: English proficiency test (Starter), book challenge project, video lessons, games and "game-based learning", English proficiency Mid-term test, field-trip "American corner", digital storytelling, newspaper project, writing your story project, blogging, case-study, final English proficiency test, and extra-curricular activities.

First of all, the practical implementation of our study is based on the Task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Nunan, 2004; Ellis, 2000). We consider TBLT an effective way of teaching linguistically gifted students because it focuses on authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. The basic concept of such kind of teaching is a learner-centered approach, where teachers are only the facilitators in the classroom. In this sense, we have particularly adhered to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development where students have the liberty to implement certain tasks themselves without the teacher's interference or further explanation. In fact, our curriculum has been designed in such a way that students can have enough amount of independence in implementing and accomplishing tasks (Vygotsky, 1989).

Linguistic giftedness activities curriculum

12 weeks curriculum, lessons – 4 hours a week.

- 1) English proficiency Test (Starter): Vocabulary and Grammar Zone, Listening, Writing, Reading, Speaking
- 2) Book challenge project
- 3) Video lessons: Lesson on Movie “Death becomes her” and exercises to this movie;
TED presentation on Detroit city and discussion; Refugee Crisis and Society nowadays; Tiny Housing.
- 4) Games and “Game-based learning”
- 5) English proficiency Mid-term Test: Vocabulary and Grammar Zone, Listening, Writing, Reading, Speaking
- 6) Field trip “American Corner”
- 7) Digital Storytelling
- 8) Newspaper project
- 9) Writing your story project: structuring your story
- 10) Blogging
- 11) Case-Study: Public journalism in Cyberspace
- 12) Final English Proficiency Test: Vocabulary and Grammar Zone, Listening, Writing, Reading, Speaking

Extra-curricular activities for the course:

- ✓ Ice-breakers
- ✓ Comic books: Comic book project
- ✓ Individual consultation with a teacher (whenever needed)
- ✓ TED conferences (inspiring speeches): additional discussions
- ✓ A list of TV shows to watch for English Listening
- ✓ Movies to watch: Dead Poets Society, Great Debaters, October Sky, Mississippi Burning, That’s what I am, Secret life of Bees.

4. Study progress and results of the experiment

First and foremost, before starting the course, the students had to take a linguistic giftedness test. It should be mentioned that they have already been identified as gifted by the school admission test, and our incentive for testing them before the course was – to see their performance at the test and evaluate the possible outcome of the course. The test consisted of the creative logic test, verbal comprehension test, cognitive ability test.

The pre-course test on linguistic giftedness demonstrated us that the chosen twelve students were the appropriate candidates for taking the course (Diagram 1).

The lowest score on test was 80 percent and the highest score was 95 percent which was a signal to us that we could start the course.

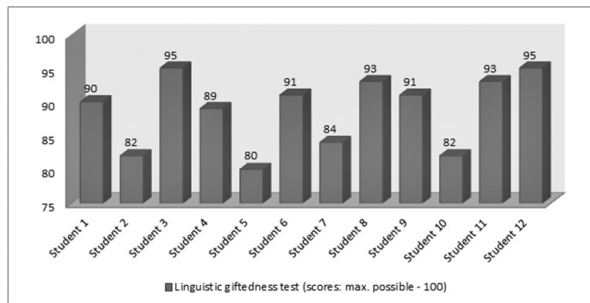


Diagram 1. Linguistic giftedness test results

Another interesting part of our research is that after taking the test our students were offered to fill out an opinion questionnaire that consisted of 12 questions concerning the quality of English lessons.

The analysis of the questionnaire showed the opinion discrepancy between learners, i.e. there was a visible difference in how students viewed their English lessons and the quality of those lessons. One particular example is the third question “Do you feel that some of your classmates are holding you back, and as a result – you are learning slower than you could?”. The majority of students answered negatively to that question but two students responded positively. In fact, one particular student commented the following: “I don’t want to show myself as a brass person, but unfortunately there are some people that make me feel a bit uncomfortable at English lessons. I’ve been studying in Malaysia for a year. Perhaps I speak better English than them”.

The majority of students responded quite expressively to the following question “Do you think you would be more interested in a particular school subject more if you had a different teacher?”. Many students had different stories to share when they had a difficult relationship with a teacher in a given subject, and as a result – their performance suffered tremendously. We would like to give one example: “Of course, for example, physics. I’m not going to say much about the teacher, but one thing is that she is a bit strange. I love physics but I hate the teacher because she gives excellent marks only to students she likes”. Again, this question wasn’t really related to English lesson area, but in our opinion, it was useful to know how students felt in their school in general to be better prepared for our experiment.

Another question that attracted our attention is the following: “Do you think your English classes could be more efficient? What would be your suggestions about how to make English lessons more efficient?”

One student answered: “Modern methods and books. Lessons with native speakers”.

Another student’s opinion: “I’m an extremely talkative person, and I think that students and teachers should talk during English lessons because speaking gives an opportunity to express your ideas about a certain situation. I’ve learned English by virtue of speaking with people, and I consider it a great experience for students.

The questionnaire gave us a clear view on student’s current development at school and whether they were satisfied with the knowledge their school provides. Overall, most students are happy in their school. These twelve students are intelligent, promising and bright students. Before starting the course, we have explained to them the purpose of the lessons. Also we told them about our experiment and they agreed to take part in it.

Right after analyzing test results, we started the course of English language to linguistically gifted students. As was said before, we elaborated our own curriculum according to “The Strategic linguistic giftedness model” and Task-based language teaching.

The English proficiency test of week 1 (English proficiency test: Starter) brought to our attention the following fact – common English proficiency vulnerabilities of students were grammar and speaking. As we noticed the problem and were aware of its existence, we thought of new ways to differentiate the lesson content. Our lessons covered all four basic language skills and were wholesome (Diagram 2). The highest student’s score in the test was 94 and the lowest score was 82. 3 students particularly struggled with grammar and 2 students had some difficulties in the speaking test.

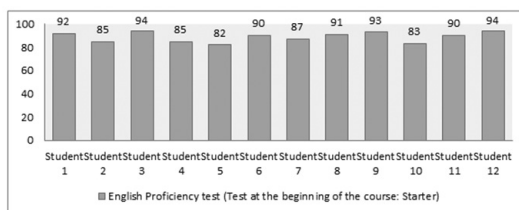


Diagram 2. English proficiency Test (Starter)

As can be seen, each week brought new activities into students’ class. Task-based language teaching exerted a great influence on overall mood in the classroom. Our students willingly participated in group work as well as in individual work. To track students’ progress, we included three English proficiency examination tests in the curriculum. During in-course testing, we also gathered opinion questionnaires from students.

Questionnaire of week 5 showed student’s motivation and eagerness in continuing the course: Student 4 “I liked the Book challenge project. Each student made a presentation on their favorite book and why others should read them. Now I know what I’m going to read next”. Student 9: “This is like a snow ball, we’re getting immersed into the course gradually, and I’m enjoying the way we are taught. There’s something special in it. I definitely see the difference”.

However, some students didn’t like testing very much: Student 1: “I don’t like to take tests all the time, but other than that – it’s pretty awesome. I get to express myself and get grades. This is just amazing”.

Student 4: “I loved Game-Based learning week especially. I love games and talking about learning English through playing games was something I never expected to hear at English class. Usually, it’s about reading and writing. I’m glad I signed up for this course, and one more thing – I’m used to being tested or getting somewhere all the time. I’ve been told that this course is aimed at gifted students. Actually, it’s a paradise to be at this course, I don’t feel the usual pressure like in other times. When I got home yesterday, I understood that this course motivates me to do more. And it’s not like making me do it! I choose to do it”.

The results of the English proficiency Mid-term test indicated a visible shift in student’s progress in English language proficiency. In comparison with the Starter test all 12 students demonstrated better results in all respects. The five students that initially had difficulties in speaking and grammar areas significantly improved their performance. The highest score of the test was 96 and the lowest score was 85 (Diagram 3).

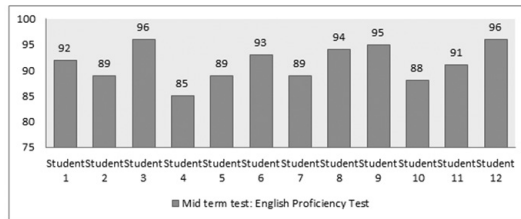


Diagram 3. English proficiency Test (Mid-term test)

At the end of each week students handed in their homework for evaluation. The acceleration strategy was used in Digital storytelling, Newspaper project and case-study: Public journalism in Cyberspace because those projects were more time-consuming and students had to prepare materials according to the deadline. Students demonstrated a lot of creativity, inspiration and dedication to studying. Many students were willing to take extra-curricular exercises what was also included in our curriculum (enrichment strategy from the model). We applied a number of dif-

ferent exercises aimed at the improvement of various skills which is the differentiation strategy according to the model. Our model is called Strategic for a reason. It gradually works on enhancing student’s English proficiency.

As a matter of fact the results of Final English proficiency test are the proof that “Strategic linguistic giftedness model” and “Linguistic giftedness activities curriculum” assisted students’ progress in their English language skills. All students showed “excellent” results in the test. The highest score was 100 and the lowest score was 90. At the end of the test students admitted they felt more confident when speaking English and implementing grammar tasks which were the initial problematic areas (Diagram 4).

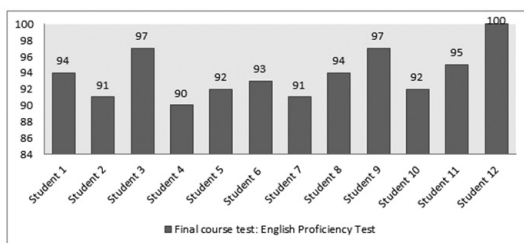


Diagram 4. English proficiency Test (Final test)

The Validity of the “Strategic Linguistic Giftedness Model”

The test results indicated the gradual growth in student’s performance. For example, the test of week 1 demonstrated two major students’ problems in English acquisition, i.e. – grammar and speaking. The mid-term test showed the definite improvement in problematic areas, and the final test results proved that that progress was genuine. In fact all twelve students commented on their progress during the course and many of them reported feeling more confident in expressing themselves in English language (Diagram 5).

Introducing Task-based language teaching into the linguistic giftedness classroom proved to be the right choice for students improved the areas that exactly needed to be further developed.

The curriculum has been composed according to the Strategic linguistic giftedness model. The theory behind the model found the practical implementation in Task-based language teaching and Integrated approach of developing four basic language skills. As the main problematic areas were speaking and grammar we included plenty of exercises that focused on discussions, case-study, drama, information-gap, problem-solving and brainstorming methods.

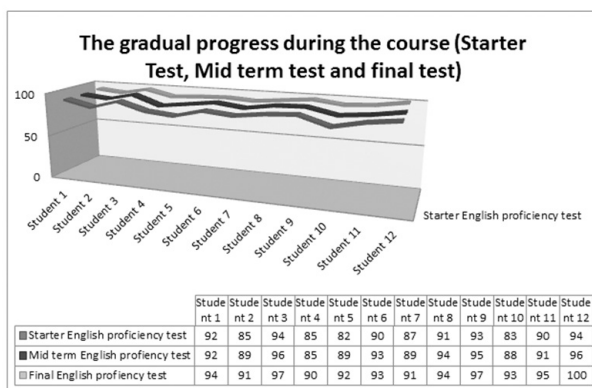


Diagram 5. The gradual progress during the course (Starter Test, Mid term Test, Final Test)

It is noticeable that the curriculum offered a lot of opportunities for implementing different projects in English language. Students worked individually and in groups. The curriculum contains up-to-date and engaging exercises in order to keep students motivated and interested in the course. To track students' achievement, they have been tested three times during the course.

5. Findings

We find that the strategy-based approach in English teaching is the foundation of our study. In lieu of the above-mentioned strategies we managed to successfully implement our experiment and research.

This is the list of exercises we applied in the gifted classroom from the book "400 ideas for interactive whiteboards": Digital storytelling, Dictogloss, Project presentation, Predicting the content of a news article, Brainstorming around a topic, Visual Thesaurus, Inserting sentences, Shrinking topics list, Planning a holiday WebQuest, Predicting visuals, Digital camera conversations (Sharma et al. 2015).

Kazakhstan is one of the countries that exercises the policy of accepting new trends into national education, thus pertaining to quality and standards of education.

Indeed, the recent growth of gifted schools is a great indicator of educational development in the country. The wise choice to turn to western experience in education resulted in the successful implementation of our study and experiment. We composed the Strategic linguistic giftedness model by studying various theoretical models, methods and approaches on linguistic giftedness, and created the curriculum to prove the model efficient. The experiment results indicated that gifted students, even though their initial test results were "good" and "excellent" – further improved their performance during the course to "excellent".

Therefore, it is right to say that the experiment proved the Strategic linguistic giftedness model efficient. We suggest that this model can be used in other English language gifted classrooms.

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Assoc. prof. Roza Zhussupova, PhD
rozazhusupova@mail.ru

L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University
 2, Satpayev str., Nur-Sultan, 010000 Kazakhstan

Asst. prof. Zhanargul Beisembayeva, PhD
zhannabei@mail.ru

L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University
 2, Satpayev str., Nur-Sultan, 010000 Kazakhstan

Prof. Madeleine Danova, PhD

m.danova@uni-sofia.bg
 Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”
 15 Tzar Osvoboditel, Blvd. Sofia 1504, Bulgaria

Доц. д-р Роза Жусупова

rozazhusupova@mail.ru

Евразийски национален университет „Л. Н. Гумильов“
 ул. „Сагпаев“ 2, Нур-Султан, 010000 Казахстан

ас. д-р Жанаргул Бейсембаева

zhannabei@mail.ru

Евразийски национален университет „Л. Н. Гумильов“
 ул. „Сагпаев“ 2, Нур-Султан, 010000 Казахстан

Проф. д-р Мадлен Данова

m.danova@uni-sofia.bg
 Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“
 бул. „Цар Освободител“ 15, София 1504, България