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THE FORMATION OF FOREIGN COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE CONDITIONS OF VIRTUAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Nowadays, virtual interaction between a teacher and a student is considered to be a normal everyday process. The pandemic that broke out in 2020 became a turning point, since the virus that spread around the world led to the transformation of major spheres of human life. It had a critical influence on the system of education, which meant that teachers had to quickly adapt to virtual interaction with students and to be able to assess their academic achievement under the conditions of virtual educational environment. There are certain changes in the field of communication. Today, online meetings, online conferences, and even online corporate events are part of modern reality that seemed unbelievable only a year ago. It is known that the main goal of teaching a foreign language is to form the communicative competence. This aim was mainly achieved through live communication and emotional contact between the teacher and students striving to develop their language skills. The authors of this article paid special attention to the analysis of the main ways of introduction of the communicative activity approach, which is traditionally considered as the theoretical basis for foreign language teaching. The authors dealt with the problem of formation of the communicative competence under the conditions of virtual educational environment.

1. Introduction

In a digital society (digital native) such terms as "digital" and "electronic" are commonly used in the domestic and professional spheres (digital economy, digital technology, digital signal, digital humanitarian knowledge, digital human rights; electronic commerce, electronic ticket, electronic queue, electronic money, electronic document management, electronic signature, etc.).

Education is a system that is affected by social changes. It is constantly developing and it tends to adapt to new conditions and needs. Digitalization of the educational space means "optimizing the teaching process by means of electronic resources" (Deryabina & Dyakova, 2018, p. 601).
Modern researchers emphasize that the electronic space significantly transforms the educational paradigm model (Aladyshkin et al., 2017; Bylieva et al., 2018; Gashkova et al., 2017; Mitrofanova & Zherebtsova, 2019).

Not so long ago, the researchers highlighted the importance of the digital literacy of the teacher. In their works many foreign and domestic researchers paid special attention to the level of computer literacy as an important interdisciplinary competence of specialists in various fields (Bovtenko, 2006; Claro et al., 2018; Svärd, 2017). Due to the fact that in the spring of 2020 teachers had to organize the educational process online, the level of distance education rapidly increased, since the teachers of schools and universities had to provide online classes. They had to quickly adapt to the new conditions and to use various forms of virtual interaction to get feedback from their students.

At present time, methodologists strive to find the ways to help students learning online to acquire specific competencies, since it is impossible to use the traditional forms of interaction.

2. Problem Statement

The digitalization of the educational space has a great influence on the development of language teaching methods – linguodidactics. On the one hand, digital space is "a useful resource for the teacher" (Ndyay et al., 2020, p. 21), it has provided new tools for presenting material and educational content and new ways of interaction with students, which contributes to the teaching process. On the other hand, it gives another opportunity to study languages thanks to the so-called computer-mediated communication (the term was suggested by the American researcher Susan Herring) (Herring, 2007). It is crucial to pay special attention to the way this type of communication is organized.

In this research the authors claim that in the process of virtual communication between a foreign language teacher and a group of students, it is rather hard to form a communicative competence, since it is traditionally based on direct live communication between the teacher and students, and within the group.

3. Research Questions

1. An online lesson of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) in the conditions of digital transformation of pedagogical activity.
2. The use of the communicative activity approach within the digital educational space.
3. Language group participating in the process of virtual interaction.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is the identification of problems of the communicative competence formation in the conditions of virtual interaction between a teacher and a group of students learning a foreign language. Under these conditions, the educational process is based on the communicative activity approach.

5.   Research Methods

The methods of this research have been analytical-descriptive including review and analysis of scientific and methodological literature on the given subject, and also the description of difficulties of communicative activity approach implementation in the process of teaching foreign language; comparative analysis of traditional and innovative foreign language teaching tools; generalization of best and personal practices of digital technologies integration into the educational environment.

6.   Findings

Researchers developing the methods of teaching RFL have considerable experience in the field of electronic linguodidactics. Azimov (1996) described the theoretical and practical methods of teaching RFL with the help of computer technology. The rapidly developing web technologies and the ways they can be used in teaching RFL are described by Polat et al., (2004) and other researchers. Due to the digitalization of the educational process, there is a change in the requirements for the content of the training professiogram. In his works Bovtenko (2006) focuses on the components of the information and communication competence of a RFL teacher. Bogomolov (2008) presented specific scientific methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language under the conditions of virtual educational environment. Ndjelassili and Shaklein (2019) focus on literary and linguistic analysis methods in teaching foreign philologists.

The authors of the aforementioned works claimed that teaching methods should combine traditional teaching aids with electronic linguodidactics; whereas computer technologies were not considered as the only tool for the formation of the foreign language communicative competence (Popova, 2019). However, due to the current situation, teachers have to interact with students online and organize the educational process by means of distance technologies.

Today, methodologists have to find effective ways to form a foreign language communicative competence under the conditions of virtual educational environment. Obviously, to reach this goal, it is necessary to rely not only on methodologists and philologists, but also on psychologists and IT specialists.

Tryapel'nikov (2014) claims that "due to the changes in the educational paradigm and the new telecommunication and informational conditions in which the teaching process is organized, methodology and linguodidactics face new problems. Everything is undergoing great changes: the means of education, teaching methods and forms, approaches and techniques" (p. 5). This concerns the current situation. Since there are modern hardware products, electronic didactic tools, electronic teaching aids, and teachers have

to organize the educational process online, it is crucial to introduce innovative foreign language teaching aids which should meet certain requirements.

The concept of "electronic linguodidactics" has replaced the concept of "computer linguodidactics" (Gartsov, 2013, p. 58). Today, the hardware products used in the process of language teaching include not only personal computers, but also laptops, all-in-one computers, tablet computers, smartphones, etc. Thanks to the development of electronic linguodidactics, a new form of teaching was introduced –teachers started to give lessons online.

Students involved in e-learning obtain knowledge and develop their skills by means of Internet technologies. The structural unit of systemic online learning is an online lesson which is organized in real time thanks to the seamless access to the Internet.

Teachers organize online lessons in accordance with the timetable and they need to achieve certain goals in the process of teaching a group of students (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 326). However, in this case different training tools are used.

Thanks to the development of the modern Internet technologies, teachers can organize online lessons by means of special programs: 1) websites for webinars (for example, My Own Conference, Webinar.ru, Mirapolis Virtual Room; Teems, Zoom, etc.) or 2) modern video messengers like Skype, Viber, WhatsApp. These programs are suitable for individual tutorials and teaching a small group of students. The teacher and students can see each other or demonstrate the lesson materials in special "chat-windows".

The communicative activity approach is aimed at developing students' communication skills. Communicative competence is a complex phenomenon and "is based on linguistic, speech and sociocultural competences" (Mikova & Mamontov, 2019, p. 432). According to Azimov (2009), the educational process should meet certain requirements, if the communicative activity approach is used: "communication behavior of the teacher; communication situations; grammar exercises; an individual approach; context of the learning process which stimulates speech activity and helps to develop speaking skills" (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 100). According to Zimnyaya and Mazaeva (2015), to introduce the communicative activity approach, it is crucial to focus on collective learning, problem-solving activities, and collaboration between the teacher and students.

When teachers use the communicative activity approach in the process of interaction with their students online, they face certain difficulties.

Under the conditions of virtual educational environment, teachers' communication behavior mostly meets certain requirements. The teacher giving online classes has an opportunity to encourage students to communicate (the way he/she does in the classroom), but, as a rule, it is a "student - teacher" interaction but not a "student - student" communication. Conducting webinars, the teacher does not always have an opportunity to see all students at the same time. Thus, the teacher faces a number of problems to encourage effective communication within the group of students.

In this regard, it is necessary to determine the number of students in a language group, since productive active communication is impossible within a large study group. The authors of the article believe that the language group should include about 5-6 students.

If a language group consists of 10-15 students, a teacher can also organize the educational process but the tasks will be different: students try to be the first to answer the teacher's questions in online chat-rooms, or they take turns to give responses to the teacher's questions, etc.

In the context of digital interaction between the teacher and the study group, communication situations can be a useful tool for involving students in active virtual interaction. In this case, the teacher needs to concentrate on the communicative aspects and use icons or screensavers, pictures and signs, demonstrating a socially determined role of the speaker.

Interacting with learners online, the teacher finds it more difficult to assess the individual characteristics of students: how long it takes them to perceive the information, if they can concentrate on the new learning materials, etc. Since there is no direct eye contact, it is quite problematic to guess if students get the message when the new material is explained to them.

In addition, poor Internet connection can make online lessons less effective as due to the problems with the Internet students may find it difficult to concentrate. The authors claim that to meet one of the requirements to introduce the communicative activity approach, the teacher can record the lessons on Zoom and Teams to give students an opportunity to revise the material and analyze their work.

Interacting with students online, teachers can use e-learning tools: electronic textbooks, online textbooks, websites, copyright electronic resources (teacher's own presentations, photos, tables, infographics, charts, audio and video recordings, etc.), an electronic board, and students' personal accounts, etc.

Thanks to the modern technologies, teachers have a lot of opportunities to develop their pedagogical creativity. For example, teachers can work on their own to prepare electronic educational and methodological materials for online lessons:

- presentations (Microsoft Power, Google Presentations, Piktochart, etc.);
- mental maps (Mind42, Coogle, Mindmeister, XMind, etc.)
- puzzles, crosswords (Decalion, rebus. 1, etc.)
- infographics (Infogram, Venngage, Easelly, Creately, etc.);
- time lines (TimeRime.com, Time.Graphics, myHistro, TimeToast, etc.);
- tests, exercises, trainings, quizzes (Quizlet, Learningapps, Thinglink, etc.);
- audio materials and video recordings (Sodaphonic, Clipchamp, etc.).

To organize distance learning, teachers have to use a wider range of electronic learning tools, since in the process of online interaction teachers cannot rely on the resources which are normally used for individual work (Kalita et al., 2018). Thus, organizing distance learning, teachers can combine e-learning tools with electronic courses (Russian language online courses on such portals as "Education in Russian" [https://pushkininstitute.ru], "Open Education" [https: //openedu.38ru], "Universarium" [http://universarium.org], "Coursera" [https://www.coursera.org] (Gonchar & Popova, 2018) and "Lectorium" [https://www.lektorium.tv/mooc], etc.), learning management systems (for example, MOODLE, TUIS) and mobile applications ("Duolingo", "Busuu - Language Learning Easy", "Russian in a Month", "Memrise", etc.). E-learning tools have much in common with the learning management systems. However, e-learning tools belong to a different category as they have additional functions:

teachers can use microphones on their smartphones (for example, a teacher can record a student's speech and give a qualitative assessment by means of a special program for decoding audio material). In addition, within the context of online interaction, e-learning tools are also used by teachers to give students homework.

It should be noted that it takes teachers a long time to learn how to use a great variety of electronic teaching aids and services for modeling the process of online learning. Besides, teachers have to take intoaccount the individual characteristics of the group and choose the most optimal teaching tools to give online lessons. If teachers are unable to use these tools properly, they cannot organize their classroom and involve their students in the learning process.

Still, it is rather problematic to establish virtual control over students and to get them to work independently. Moreover, using e-learning tools, teachers need to find the way to objectively assess students.

In addition, teachers should keep it in their minds that e-learning tools help to achieve the goal of teaching a foreign language, in other words, they help to form a foreign language communicative competence. Therefore, today methodologists need to make some recommendations on how to use a wide range of e-learning tools to create situations that will motivate students to develop their foreign language skills and to get involved in oral and written communication.

7. Conclusion

The integration of digital technologies into education is a natural process characterizing the modern society. Teaching foreign languages online is a popular form of the educational process, combining the features of innovative pedagogical technologies and traditional teaching methods (the main focus is on the active interaction between the teacher and students). However, if we take into account the competency-based approach and teaching methods used in the conditions of virtual interaction, we can state that teachers face a number of problems in the process of formation of the communicative competence:

1. Interacting with students online, the teacher has to create communication situations. Thus, the teacher needs to concentrate on the communicative aspects and motivate students by means of icons or screensavers, pictures and signs, demonstrating a socially determined role of the speaker.

2. Within the process of online interaction with students, teachers find it difficult to take into consideration the individual psychological characteristics of each student in order to use an individual teaching approach.

3. Poor Internet connection can make online lessons less effective as due to the problems with the Internet students may find it difficult to concentrate.

4. Since there is no direct eye contact, it is quite problematic to guess if students get the message when the new material is explained to them.

5. Teachers find it challenging to establish virtual control over students who have to work independently to do their written assignments.

Acknowledgments

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