Distance Learning in Language Courses Under the Constraints of the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Impact of Face-To-Face Learning on Student Motivation


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Abstract

The goal of the study is to establish and analyze the opportunities offered by online learning of language courses based on practical experience, what advantages and drawbacks of such learning can be found, and what are its prospects in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

The study provides substantiation for the relevance of studying distance learning of language disciplines in the COVID-19 pandemic and presents various approaches to researching the specific features of online language learning. The article presents the results of a case study of online learning of language courses in different age and professional groups of students of the M.K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University, Russia.

The teaching of theoretical courses of the language cycle virtually does not suffer in terms of efficiency and effectiveness from the transition to fully online learning, while the teaching of practical courses should at best be combined, or blended because direct, personalized contact with the teacher is important for the development of students’ learning motivation. That said, being deprived of such contact does not bring any harm to language students, especially when it is preceded by an extended period of instruction with personalized teacher-student contact.

Online teaching of language courses offers the students the same opportunities as traditional classroom learning, with the exception of direct contact that results in the development and maintenance of students’ learning motivation.

Keywords: COVID-19, Distance Learning, Attendance, Grades, Theoretical Disciplines, Practical Disciplines.

Introduction

For a considerable part of 2020, teaching at Russian institutions of higher education (universities) was conducted online as a consequence of the global pandemic of COVID-19 (Glebov et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2021). Naturally, online learning in higher education institutions has spread to foreign language teaching in both linguistic and non-linguistic universities, as well as to teaching the...
The first lockdown faced by universities lasted a little over two months (from early March to late June) (Kotrikadze & Zharkova, 2021). During this time, various researchers noted the fact that teaching foreign language and theoretical disciplines of the language cycle at universities exclusively online, that is, without the possibility of including regular classes and control activities in real, rather than virtual, contact between teachers and students, has become an urgent problem of language education methodology in Russian universities (Golubeva et al., 2021). In our view, practical and theoretical exploration of this problem would be best to start with a discussion of the many cases. This allows analyzing the practical experience of teaching foreign language courses and disciplines of the language cycle fully online and draw practical and theoretical conclusions from this experience, which can later become the basis for the development of a coherent theory and effective methodology of the corresponding educational process.

Literature Review

The introduction of Internet technologies into the foreign language learning process has entailed a true “revolution” in language teaching, having opened new opportunities for it (Liu et al., 2002). These opportunities were further closely examined in professional literature (Felix, 2003; Liu, 2013) and numerous articles (Compton, 2009; De Velazco & Hernández, 2018; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Hernández et al., 2020; Hernández, 2007; Janss, 2021; Russell & Curtis, 2013). The format of the present paper does not permit us to list and analyze all the possibilities and advantages of language learning via the Internet. However, as the authors of these studies conclude, new technologies have just begun to be intensively introduced in language education at the academic level. For this reason, the volume of studies and publications devoted to the use of the Internet in teaching foreign languages is constantly growing.

In this regard, the absolute majority of studies and publications concern not fully online learning but the use of online learning only as a greater or lesser part of a holistic educational process (Sun, 2014), up to half, two-thirds, or even more of which takes place offline (Yüce, 2019), that is, in the traditional classroom or extracurricular settings.

Fully online teaching of non-native languages can only be examined in regards to distance learning, although it also typically provides a certain, though very small (no more than 5%, maximum 10%), amount of learning time for direct “face-to-face” contact of students with the teacher (Blake, 2011). Nevertheless, 90% and more of exclusively online learning allow arguing that in this type of educational process, its purely informational and communicative character (holistic online learning) has been achieved (Rogerson-Revell, 2007). In the teaching of non-language disciplines in universities, the success of distance learning, in our opinion, is not doubtful, that is, the teachers of non-language academic subjects have methods and technologies that have already been tested for several years (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Picciano, 2017).

The status of foreign language teaching, we believe, is different. Numerous attempts have been made to introduce distance learning in the educational process of foreign language teaching (Cheng et al., 2010). They, however, did not yield much success or gain popularity, except for the cases of teaching foreign-language writing (Sung & Yeh, 2012) or reading (Tanyeli, 2009), that is, written speech activities. No considerable success has yet been achieved in the development of spoken speech. Aside from the technical opportunities, which were much more limited compared to the present day even five years ago, one of the reasons behind this is indicated by C.S. Salcedo (2010), who states that such success in speech teaching depends not only on the tools at the teacher’s disposal, however complex, sophisticated, and multifunctional they may be (e.g., the Internet) but on the teachers and students themselves in their direct contact and interaction.

There are, however, no studies or publications that can reasonably prove the possibility of effectively teaching language disciplines only and entirely online. Yet in the presence of an urgent need for such training, it is necessary to investigate its main disadvantages and advantages and what can be expected in terms of its results.

The proposed study hypothesis is that online teaching of language courses offers students the same opportunities as traditional classroom learning, with the exception of direct contact that results in the development and maintenance of students’ learning motivation.

The research objectives are:

• To conduct a theoretical analysis of scientific sources on the problem of distance learning of language disciplines in higher education;
• To carry out monitoring of online classes of the language cycle disciplines;
• To analyze the results of the monitoring of online classes of the language cycle disciplines;
• To formulate the conclusions and prospects for further research.

The paper consists of an introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Methods

Model of the study

The experimental study exploring the opportunities, advantages, and disadvantages of online learning of language courses is based on the data obtained in the M.K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University, Russia, in the course of fully online learning in the following courses: 1) “Practical course of the main foreign language (English)” for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th-year students of the linguistics specialty “Applied linguistics of the English language” – 81 students; 2) “Foreign language (English)” for 1st-year students of the non-linguistics specialty “Psychology” – 30 students; 3) theoretical linguistic discipline “Introduction to socio- and psycholinguistics” taught in Russian to 2nd-year students of the linguistics specialty “Applied linguistics of the English language” (29 people); 4) theoretical discipline “Fundamentals of psychology and pedagogy” taught in English (which allows classifying it as a language discipline) to 2nd-year linguistics students (29 people).

The duration of online learning, the variety of disciplines, and the coverage of a significant contingent of students (111 students in linguistic and non-linguistics majors studying in the four courses) allow us to draw preliminary conclusions about the effectiveness of online teaching of the language cycle disciplines in the university.

Empirical Methods

The study employs the method of theoretical analysis of scientific sources on the problem of teaching language cycle disciplines in higher education.

The work also uses the method of observation of online learning classes of language disciplines in different age and professional groups of students of the M.K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University.

The deployed observation method involved the following:

• Observation and further description of the specific features of the teacher’s work in online lessons, as well as the peculiarities of students’ participation in them;
• Monitoring of students’ attendance of lectures and practical lessons, followed by its comparison to attendance in the in-person mode;
• Monitoring of students’ academic performance in online learning and its further comparison to academic performance in the in-person mode.

Mathematical processing of the study results

The mathematical and statistical methods used in processing the study results include the calculation of the dynamics of attendance in online classes of the language cycle disciplines and the dynamics of student performance in comparison with the learning outcomes in the in-person mode.

Results

The results of the monitoring of attendance in online classes of the language cycle disciplines describe attendance rates, as well as academic performance rates, in October-November 2020 (online learning) and their subsequent comparisons to September of the same year (standard classroom learning).

Table 1 shows the results of the monitoring of the process of learning the disciplines of the language cycle in different age and professional groups of students after the introduction of full online training.

Table 1. Results of monitoring of online classes of the language cycle disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content of monitoring</th>
<th>Sample characteristic</th>
<th>Theoretical discipline</th>
<th>Practical discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance dynamic</td>
<td>2nd-year linguists</td>
<td>-35%</td>
<td>-27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3rd-year linguists</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4th-year linguists</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st-year psychologist</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance dynamic</td>
<td>2nd-year linguists</td>
<td>-31%</td>
<td>-24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3rd-year linguists</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4th-year linguists</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st-year psychologist</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The monitoring results demonstrate that a reduction in attendance and performance rates with the transition to online learning is found in all age and professional groups of students yet with different levels of intensity.

Further on, we will discuss the possible reasons for the results obtained, as well as the specific features of teachers’ work in teaching classes online and the peculiarities of students’ participation in online lessons.

Discussion

It is reasonable to begin the discussion of the study results with the theoretical disciplines taught online to the 2nd-year students of the “Applied linguistics” specialty, one of which, as already mentioned, was taught and studied entirely in English (the “Fundamentals of psychology and pedagogy” course), while another course, “Introduction to socio- and psycholinguistics”, was studied in Russian.

Lectures on each of the two courses were not much different from lectures in in-person learning. Moreover, by virtue of the capabilities of Internet technologies, technically the lecturer’s work became more convenient and effective, since:

1) The demonstration of pre-made illustrative materials such as slides, charts, tables, graphs, etc. with multimedia equipment was more convenient compared to a real classroom.

2) Due to the inability to make any extensive notes on the blackboard during the lecture in the conditions of distance learning, the teacher had to prepare them for demonstration in advance, which improved the quality of the material due to more careful consideration, saved class time, and made the notes easier for students’ perception, as they were presented with clear typed text on the screen instead of the chalk notes that often had to be “deciphered”, and if they had to write down a word, term, short phrase, etc., they could easily do so in the chat room.

3) It was easier and more convenient for the teacher to engage the students in the lecture, making it interactive, asking questions, offering to comment on a certain problem or phenomenon, etc. The teacher was able to address the audience specifically, by showing their names on the monitor, while in a real classroom with a large number of attendees, this degree of targeting is much harder to achieve.

The only thing lacking in online lectures compared to the traditional is eye contact with the listeners and the ability to assess their reaction to what they hear. This, however, is a secondary disadvantage, because even in the conditions of teaching in person, the lecturer only has such contact with the listeners sitting close enough to them. In an auditorium with several dozen listeners, such contact with all of them is simply impossible.

The aforementioned also applies to seminars in theoretical language courses (in our case, in both of such courses, each lecture was followed by a seminar on the material presented in it). Students’ presentations and reports on the completed educational projects, which are often held in seminars, are not in any way worse, and perhaps better in online learning because of the already mentioned opportunity to more effectively operate with multimedia demonstrations and due to the fact that students are less distracted by external factors in contrast to the traditional classroom.

Students’ work on problematic issues, cases, etc. in pairs and small groups with a consequent report on the results of the analysis to the rest of the participants in the seminar is also possible and no less effective than in a regular seminar, as the students working in pairs or groups cause no distraction to others (which is less attainable in a traditional classroom setting because different pairs and small groups hear each other to some degree, which inevitably interferes with everyone’s work). The teacher’s distance work with pairs and small groups is also more convenient compared to a regular setting, as when they join one of the groups, they are not distracted by other students’ conversations (Russell & Curtis, 2013). As for the direct visual psychological contact of the teacher with students in seminars, the point made above in the discussion of lectures applies here, as well.

Teaching foreign languages (in our case, English) is a different case. First and foremost, these courses form the skills and abilities of communication in a foreign language, the assimilation of which shapes the secondary linguistic personality of the learner (Sun, 2014). The formation of the secondary linguistic personality based on foreign language communication skills and abilities depends on the learner’s personal attitude, i.e., on their motivation, the development and maintenance of which, in turn, requires direct personified contact with the foreign language teacher, a carrier of a secondary linguistic personality. In traditional classes, this personalized contact, which largely determines students' high learning motivation in mastering foreign language communication and forming their secondary linguistic personality, usually does occur and is constantly maintained (Rogerson-Revell, 2007). This is fostered by the conditions of traditional learning: the considerable duration of the language courses and the small number of students in the groups allow the teacher to know the students well as individuals, often contacting them directly and...
personally psychologically influencing them. Meanwhile, in online learning, the possibility of such influence is doubtful, as direct offline contacts of teachers with students and students with each other are impossible (Salcedo, 2010) (there are only voices and, at best, images through a video camera, which students and even teachers replace with pictures, which makes communication depersonalized).

In all other aspects, foreign language lessons in a regular audience and online are quite identical. All that can be done in in-person learning can be done in an online classroom, too. The only issue is to what degree does the depersonification of learning foreign languages online inhibit the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational process.

According to the results of observation (Table 1), contrary to what was expected, almost no negative consequences of depersonalization in online learning are found in practical English language lessons held with 3rd and 4th-year students of the “Applied linguistics in the English language” specialty. Attendance in student groups only decreased by a maximum of 5-6%, if at all. The success of learning also did not decrease in the results of the current control, as well as in the indicators of the exam session. Overall, observations do not reveal any deterioration in the quality of learning compared with the previous period.

In 2nd-year students, however, these indicators are worse. First and foremost, this concerns online attendance, which decreased by nearly a third compared to standard in-person learning. As for academic performance, in the students who attended all online lessons, it was as high as before the introduction of online learning, whereas in those whose attendance was irregular, the performance lowered. We attribute the decreased attendance among 2nd-year students to the fact that it was the first time their teacher worked with this group, in contrast to the 3rd and 4th-year groups, which had been working with him for several years prior. As a result, the teacher had no time to properly motivate the learners, make them recognize and accept his requirements for establishing personal personified contact, which demonstrates a mutual positive emotional relationship and a certain mutual understanding. In a depersonalized online learning environment, such motivational influence proved to be unattainable.

The situation was much worse in the 2nd-year student group of the non-linguistics specialty “Psychology”. Attendance in it dropped by half, and the progress of learning decreased even more so that at the end of the semester, only a third of the students successfully passed the test at the right time.

The reason for all the identified dissimilarities between the groups, whose work in English classes was monitored for quite a long time, can only be one thing – the level of the students’ learning motivation.

In groups where learning motivation is high, the depersonalized and virtual nature of online classes does not pose a threat to their efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, we can make a preliminary assumption, which, of course, requires experimental confirmation, that physically and psychologically comfortable working conditions and the presence of fewer distractions in the classroom even increase the effectiveness of lessons to some extent.

In our view, at least part of the students of linguistics specialties should still have their learning motivation developed through the efforts of qualified, interested, and demanding teachers during the time of personal, face-to-face contact in traditional classes. If the contact was long enough (as in the 3rd and 4th-year groups), its termination with the start of online-only training has no negative impact. If there was no such real contact or it was short, the negative impact can manifest itself in the demotivation of some students (as in the 2nd-year group), although most of them remain highly motivated and the transition to fully online learning does not have negative consequences for them.

These consequences appear only in the online learning of students of non-linguistic specialties (as in the case of the 2nd-year Psychology students). Learning motivation for foreign languages is typically not quite high among such students, and if the teacher does not foster and sustain it through personal, personified, real contacts with students, the effectiveness of the educational process is very likely to drop.

Therefore, it is advisable that foreign language courses for non-linguistic specialty students are organized in the combined/blended form and not transferred to the online mode due to the low learning motivation of students. The introduction of distance (online) learning is only possible in emergencies, however, in this case, reduced efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process is to be expected.

This conclusion is supported by modern methodical research and publications, which prove the necessity of combined or blended learning of foreign languages (Stracke, 2007), in which the autonomous educational process in the traditional classroom or extracurricular settings is organically and necessarily with the online educational process (Neumeier, 2005), while the latter can take up quite a significant (up to 50% and more) share of this process overall (Hubackova et al., 2011).
Conclusion

We can draw the following conclusions.

The process of teaching theoretical courses of the language cycle (given learning motivation) virtually does not suffer from the transition to fully online learning in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, it is possible to consider the option of teaching such theoretical courses online in the normal conditions of the educational process, as well. Such an approach can provide significant economic benefits to higher education institutions.

On the other hand, the process of teaching practical foreign language courses, which is almost impossible without Internet technologies in our times, needs to be combined or blended at best (alternating in-person classes with online work), because direct personified contact with the teacher is crucial for the development of students’ learning motivation.

Meanwhile, a complete transition to distance (online) learning brings no harm to students in linguistics specialties, especially when preceded by a fairly long period of blended learning with personalized teacher-student contact. This is a consequence of the high level of learning motivation in these students, which, nevertheless, is desirable to be further developed and maintained through a more or less regular direct, real, rather than virtual, teacher-student(s) relationship.

Thus, the hypothesis of the study suggesting that the online teaching of language disciplines provides students with the same opportunities as the traditional classroom teaching, except for direct contact, leading to the development and maintenance of students’ learning motivation, is confirmed.

What can be considered as a limitation of the study is the small range of disciplines included in the monitoring of students’ attendance and academic performance, which suggests that the results of the study cannot be fully generalized.

The conclusions presented so far are only the result of observations without a final and accurate scientific (primarily experimental) justification and confirmation. Such justification and confirmation are the prospects for further research.

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