

ИНФОРМАЦИОННО-КОММУНИКАЦИОННЫЕ ТЕХНОЛОГИИ В ОБРАЗОВАНИИ

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DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH POWERSCHOOL LEARNING LMS IN A HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY¹

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Stimulated by the recent rapid developments in the field of information and communication technologies, researchers are constantly searching for different methods and approaches to make the most of technological resources and put them to the best pedagogical use. This article discusses the experience of implementing PowerSchool Learning learning management system in the English Language training course for freshmen of the postgraduate department FFLAS LMSU. The focus is placed on the development of the author's supplementary online course designed to improve the effectiveness of postgraduate students' preparation for academic communication in English. It should be noted that within the framework of blended and distance learning through PowerSchool Learning LMS it is possible to create an educational environment in which students feel more comfortable, becoming active participants in the educational process. Moreover, they develop their communicative, critical thinking and collaborative skills, being engaged in decision-making and problem-oriented discussions, which are crucial for successful professional development. As for the instructors, they should become "tech-savvy" and create innovative approaches to meet the needs of a new Net generation growing up in an increasingly globalized and a highly digitised world.

Key words: language learning; blended learning; the third level of higher education; distance learning; LMS.

1. INTRODUCTION

The priority areas for the modernisation of Russian education are informatisation, the transition to a system of lifelong learning, the creation

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of a fundamentally new educational environment based on the use of information and communication technologies, a focus on the competence approach, student-centered learning, etc. Modern education paradigms tend to include more distance learning, alongside blended and collaborative models. The concept of distance education is very appealing, as recent hardware and software innovations are making distance education technologies more available, easier to use and less costly [Nazarenko, 2013; Antoro, 2017; Simonson, Smaldino, 2019]. Distance education is now often defined as “institution based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” [Schlosser, Simonson, 2010: 1]. The traditional face-to-face learning environment seems to be indispensable for the social aspect of teaching and learning. However, Web-based asynchronous technologies such as e-mail, forums, blogs, wikis etc. can provide learners with more flexible and interactive learning environments. Also, synchronous technologies such as chats, videoconferencing, instant-messaging, etc. can enhance interaction between instructors and learners which may provide motivation for learning [Simonson, Smaldino, 2019]. Thus, it is rational to take advantage of both Internet technologies and traditional practices. The combination of traditional classroom learning with online learning is often referred to as blended learning. Charles R. Graham defines blended learning as a system that combines face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. He states that generally, people choose blended learning for 6 reasons:

- “pedagogical richness,
- access to knowledge,
- social interaction,
- personal agency,
- cost-effectiveness,
- ease of revision” [Bonk, Graham, 2012: 8].

Thus, integrating innovative online tools into the learning process creates opportunities for learners to develop their autonomy, flexibility, creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as their communication and collaboration skills, which are essential for a researcher and for a competitive specialist of the 21st century. The positive aspects of online learning environments for teachers are flexibility in management, time-saving (once uploaded all the materials are online), easier management of a variety of learning styles and the possibility to overcome limitations of classroom time, etc. [Fandei, 2011; Bonk, Graham, 2012].

2. METHODOLOGY

1.1 BLENDED SCENARIO

The article discusses the transformation of a traditional English course into a blended language course and its further transition into a fully distance one, due to the coronavirus pandemic. The course “Foreign (English) language” is delivered to postgraduate students of the FFLAS LMSU, enrolled on a postgraduate program “Cultural Studies”. This course aims to improve the level of academic English of postgraduate students, who already have a good command of general English. In this course Ph.D. candidates will be given the opportunity to polish their Academic English skills by simulating real-life academic contexts (presentations, conference papers, reviews, etc.) and to improve language accuracy as well as to develop their academic writing skills. In order to enhance the educational process, the author attempted to design a supporting online course, thus transforming the original course into a blended one.

The research on assessment of LMS as a supportive tool for blended learning environments within educational organizations has shown that blended learning with the enrichment that a LMS can offer, is one of the strongest and most common combinations [Kuran, Pedersen, Elsner, 2017]. PowerSchool Learning LMS, a cloud-based learning management system, was chosen to streamline the addition of technology into the classroom. As a teacher, you can create a classroom website, add content blocks, assign, collect, and grade works, record attendance, contact parents and school administrators all in one space. PowerSchool Learning enables students to discuss topics, create projects and websites as an individual, in a group, or as an entire class. Parents can also get involved in monitoring the educational process as there is an option for setting up a parent account. Thus, PowerSchool Learning LMS suits both K-12 and higher education.

The choice and successful use of the learning environment in the course is determined by the philosophy of the PowerSchool Learning LMS, based on the constructivist principles, and by the didactic potential of the tools included. Didactic features of PowerSchool Learning include such characteristics as simplicity and ease of use, ergonomics, interactivity, multimedia, non-linearity of text presentation, etc. The system allows to upload files of various formats (audio, video, graphics, text documents) and to create links to internal and external resources. It provides a wide range of possibilities for storing, editing, classifying and structuring information (modular principle). The communication tools (announcements, messaging, discussions, etc.) allow to conduct asynchronous conversations. An equally important didactic feature of the environment is the presence of an automated assessment system that provides self-control and self-as-

assessment of educational actions, as well as facilitating the work of the teacher. It requires time and effort for the teacher at the stage of creation, but significantly reduces them when the course is ready, providing at the same time rich statistical material for analysis. The system for tracking course participants' activity enables one to see the full picture of participation in the course as a whole, as well as detailed information on each element of the course at any time. Apart from a variety of grading and content creation tools, the system includes administrative features: different ways of adding students to roster, options to make the course active (available to students) or inactive, to divide students into groups, to create parent accounts, to co-teach, etc. The absence of advertising is one more advantage worth mentioning.

The training modules of the "English for Postgraduates" online course are preceded by an introductory administrative module, which provides a brief summary of the course, sets out the goals and objectives, specifies the duration of study, and presents the course syllabus. It contains information about the course author, who in this case is the course teacher and system administrator. An electronic journal is presented in a separate web-page, where tasks completed in the class and self-study completed tasks are recorded. Training modules are divided into 3 sections (Academic English, Academic Writing and Academic Life), in accordance with the goals of the course and the general and professional competencies to be developed. These competences include the ability to critically analyse and evaluate modern scientific achievements, generate new ideas when solving research and practical problems in interdisciplinary areas; readiness to participate in the work of Russian and international research teams, solving scientific and educational problems; the ability to conduct research independently; to study, analyse and summarise the results of scientific research in the field of theory and history of culture in order to generate their own scientific results that have novelty and relevance [Abzalova, Mazitova, 2013].

The Academic English section covers such topics as culture, science and society; English as a global language; political correctness; IT in education; ways of studying in higher education, etc. *Cambridge Academic English. An integrated skills course for EAP* by M. Hewings, C. Thaine is offered as a textbook. When studying academic writing, special emphasis is placed on paragraph writing, summarising, sentence structure and subordinated structures, connecting words and transitional signals. The textbook *Writing Academic English* by A. Oshima, A. Hogue is suggested as a course book. The Academic Life section covers topics including higher linguistic and pedagogical education in Russia, the UK and the USA, similarities and differences in academic degrees in Russia,

the UK and the USA, preparing for and participating in scientific conferences, preparing papers and presentations on topic research, etc. The main textbook here is *English for Post-Graduates* by O.I. Vasyuchkova, N.I. Knyazeva, L.V. Khvedchenya, T.G. Luksha. For each topic, the teacher publishes learning materials, offers discussion questions and collaborative tasks. In addition to the materials posted by the teacher, graduate students are encouraged to participate in the content creation. Thanks to the built-in wiki markup technology, they jointly form lists of active vocabulary on the topic, create mind maps, and make reviews of the articles proposed for analysis.

1.2 DISTANCE SCENARIO

The coronavirus pandemic made teachers face the unexpected challenge of providing distance learning as the primary mode of instruction for weeks, months and possibly for a new academic year here in Russia. With an autonomous online course already developed and functioning in PowerSchool Learning LMS we had to choose ICT tools to help us organize live videoconferences scheduled once a week as a regular face-to-face class (duration 1,5 hours) and tools that would help support group oral discussions as well as to submit individual oral tasks. Having studied both advantages and disadvantages of the two most recommended communication tools: Skype and Zoom, which have proved their efficiency in online distance learning, the choice was made in favour of Skype as it features unlimited time for small group videoconference calls. A Skype meeting link without expiration date was created to allow students to join live videoconferences with no sign-ups or downloads required. In order to prevent engagement decrease that might be induced by the lack of personal contact, it was decided to use VoiceThread (<http://voicethread.com>) which provides a visual-centric and participatory learning environment to supplement the course designed in PowerSchool Learning. The certain benefits VoiceThread provides for education, including highly interactive and engaging discussions, creating a sense of belonging to a virtual classroom, collaborative learning, increased social presence, multiple commenting options for people with different learning styles, have already been discussed in our previous investigations [Fadeeva, 2017].

3. FINDINGS

ICT tools of PowerSchool Learning LMS implemented both for synchronous and asynchronous communication help promote students' motivation to learn. Besides, learners master their command of English, develop listening comprehension, reading and writing skills and enrich their knowledge of the subject with the help of their peers' experience

and teachers' guidance. Moreover, students develop their critical thinking and collaborative skills, being engaged in decision-making and problem-oriented discussions, which are crucial for successful professional development. Personal relations and empathy between students and those supporting them (tutors) are central to learning in distance education. The teacher's role has changed in the process of implementing the blended learning and distance learning scenarios. Now the teacher is viewed as facilitator and guide, as designer of (complex) learning scenarios and as orchestrator (technology, learners, curriculum). New methods have presented new challenges for educators: viewing learning as a social, situational and tool-mediated process; viewing ICT as transforming the learning process and extending opportunities for learning; moving from literacy to multiliteracies as a fundamental competence. Thus, the instructors should become "tech-savvy" and create innovative approaches to meet the needs of a new Net generation growing up in an increasingly globalized and digitised world.

In conclusion, it should be noted that within the framework of blended and distance learning through PowerSchool Learning LMS it is possible to create an educational environment in which students feel more comfortable, becoming active participants in the educational process.

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ПРАКТИЧЕСКИЙ ОПЫТ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ СИСТЕМЫ УПРАВЛЕНИЯ ОБУЧЕНИЕМ POWERSCHOOL LEARNING ДЛЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ДИСТАНЦИОННОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ ИНОСТРАННОМУ ЯЗЫКУ В ВУЗЕ²

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Современные разработки в области информационно-коммуникационных технологий подталкивают ученых к поиску новых методов и подходов к их использованию в сфере образования. В статье рассматривается опыт использования системы управления обучением PowerSchool Learning в учебном курсе «Английский язык» на отделении аспирантуры ФИЯР МГУ имени М.В. Ломоносова и, в частности, структура и содержание созданного в ней автономного курса, предназначенного для повышения эффективности подготовки аспирантов к академическому общению на английском языке. Следует отметить, что в рамках смешанного и дистанционного обучения, использование платформы PowerSchool Learning позволяет создать образовательную среду, в которой студенты чувствуют себя более комфортно, становясь активными участниками образовательного процесса. Кроме того, они развивают коммуникативную компетенцию, критическое мышление и навыки работы в сотрудничестве, участвуя в проблемно-ориентированных дискуссиях, которые имеют решающее значение для успешного профессионального развития. Организация учебного процесса в дистанционной форме требует от преподавателей развитой ИКТ компетенции, а также новаторских подходов для удовлетворения нужд и потребностей представителей интернет-поколения, которые родились и растут в современном глобальном цифровом мире.

Ключевые слова: обучение иностранному языку; смешанное обучение; третья ступень высшего образования; дистанционное обучение; система управления обучением.

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