

Problems of teaching foreign languages at Russian universities in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract. The relevance of the research is accounted for by the contradiction between the mass-scale transition of the Russian universities to the distance learning format and the insufficient readiness of the educational process participants in the conditions of COVID-19 pandemic. The following methods of theoretical (analysis, synthesis, systematisation, comparison) and empirical (review of literature, interviewing, questioning, observation) research were comprehensively used in the paper. The situation with distance education before the pandemic was analysed; the prerequisites of the problems and difficulties of transition to online education were identified. The analysis of difficulties encountered by the teachers and students of Russian universities made it possible to identify the objective and subjective factors of their emergence, as well as to develop recommendations for further continuation of distance learning in its combination with the traditional format of education. The purpose of the research was the analysis of the current experience of working in the conditions of COVID-19 pandemic by the example of teaching the disciplines “Foreign language” and “Foreign language (legal aspect)” to the students of Plekhanov Russian University of Economics. The authors analysed the reasons of success and problems, showed the contradictions between the remote and traditional forms of learning. The key models of learning organisation involving traditional and distant forms of education with the use of remote education technologies were reviewed. In addition, an analysis of works by a number of Russian and foreign researchers on the problem of distance learning was undertaken. As a result of the research, a conclusion was made that distance learning in the modern system of higher education in Russia may be considered as a complementary form of the already existing traditional (“face-to-face”) learning format, enhancing it, and this synthesis of forms may be considered as a solution of the emerging problems in the course of learning in the pandemic environment.

Keywords: distance learning, online education, digitalisation of education, learning models

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a number of problems in education both in Russia and abroad due to the transition of the worldwide educational system to online learning. Therefore, all educational organisations found themselves in a fundamentally new situation. Compared to the previous crisis situations and related reforms in education [1], the problems caused by the given situation in education have three specific features: first, they cover the whole educational system; second, they are absolutely unpredictable because of the lack of preparedness for them; third, they are connected with a simultaneous transfer of all educational organisations to a completely new learning format.

It is necessary to emphasise that the worldwide experience in organising distance education with the use of information and computing communications is quite extensive [2-6]. Two main directions prevail: remote education via the Internet (online education) and creation of educational (open) resources for non-formal learning and possible use in formal education (open education) [7, 8].

Numerous research studies have been presented lately, engendered by the rapid development of mobile and cloud technologies which show that the introduction of mobile technologies in the learning process contributes to its radical transformation [9]. The integration of distance technologies takes into account the students' individual characteristics, and the learners can work outside the classroom at any time they are free [10]. In addition, distance technology creates a mobile interactive learning environment and provides instant feedback. In addition, these technologies address multiple learning challenges quickly and adequately, helping to create new types of material presentation and new formats of interactive assignments [11].

One may note the existence of numerous studies covering Russian education development trends in the digital epoch [12-14], as well as implementation of online courses in the educational system of universities and the role of digital technologies [15-17].

However, it is possible to identify a number of problems arising in respect of various aspects of development and implementation of educational activities with the transition to online learning. The most complicated aspect is the actual organisation of collective work, holding students' attention, asynchrony of emotional and intellectual moments of distance learning. It was found out that the gained experience of education based on distance technologies is insufficient for the organisation of contact training through the use of electronic information and educational environment and remote learning technologies. This highlights the contradiction between the large-scale simultaneous transition of the entire system of higher education to the distance learning format –which required the change of approaches to its preparation and implementation by all of its participants – and the latter's insufficient readiness to work in this new format.

This gives rise to the key problem of the present research: to identify the factors that prevent teachers and students from effective interaction in the new format of distance learning.

The purpose of the study: to identify the problems and difficulties experienced by university teachers and students under the COVID-19 pandemic on the basis of literature review and the experience of distance learning (by example of teaching foreign languages at Plekhanov Russian University of Economics) and to offer some useful models of educational forms in the digitalised learning environment.

2 Methods

There are different opinions voiced by the researchers concerning the large-scale transfer of universities to the distance learning format. In particular, Rakitov believes that the formalisation of professional knowledge and drawdown of its diversity can in certain conditions have a negative impact on future practical activities of university graduates [18].

Kolesnikova believes that in the case of distance learning the quality of educational courses and the value/meaning logic of teaching a subject recedes to the background. The sources of knowledge, in addition to targeted teaching materials, now include games, social media, open websites, all kinds of applications. This results in a shift in the ways of cognising the world – from theoretical conceptualisation to direct spontaneous action which is not always conscious [12]. It should also be noted that not every student is able to study independently in the format of distance learning, while the majority of complex courses require exactly this skill [12].

Verbitskiy emphasises that moral education should not be reduced to learner's assimilation of information regarding what is considered bad or good in the society [15]. The lack of live communication in distance learning along with digital imitation of traditional courses leads to a problem in transferring the tacit knowledge which is inseparable from a human being [19].

Relying on the technology of online learning, the student loses the ability to perceive voluminous texts. There is a real risk of degradation of speech and ideation, since thinking normally begins to form before pressing a computer key. The lack of developed practice of live communication, with due formation and generation of thought and speech, contributes to loss of reasoning [15]. Matasaka, a researcher from Japan, notes that mobile technologies, although having freed us from a whole range of everyday difficulties, still weaken and ruin us, and people will gradually lose the ability to think [20].

3 Results

Now let us turn to the practice of Plekhanov Russian University of Economics – their work experience under the COVID-19 pandemic, as exemplified by foreign language teaching within the framework of the disciplines “Foreign language” and “Foreign language (legal aspect)”.

Table 1 summarises the results of questioning offered to the students and teachers of Plekhanov Russian University of Economics.

Table 1. Survey data – feedback of students and teachers under the COVID-19 pandemic.

Questions	Answers	Digital data processing, %
1. How comfortable do you feel about the distance education in the disciplines “Foreign language” and “Foreign language (legal aspect)”?	Very convenient	36.8
	Convenient; however, face-to-face consultation with the teacher is desirable	28
	Not much comfortable.	30.3
	Completely unacceptable.	5
2. Would you like to see the elements of distance learning in the disciplines “Foreign language” and “Foreign language (legal aspect)” to be used after the pandemic?	Yes	30.4
	More likely, yes.	29.1
	More likely, no.	17.5
	Definitely not.	14.3
	I can't give a definite answer.	8.7

3. Characterise your feelings regarding full transition to distance learning	No changes in feelings and mood	37.6
	I feel more cheerful and spirited	35
	Total discomfort	24.2
	I can't give a definite answer	29.2

4 Discussion

It follows from the data shown in the table that the majority of students are generally satisfied with the organisation of distance learning in the disciplines “Foreign language” and “Foreign language (legal aspect)” during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practical classes were conducted in Zoom, the lectures – on the Webinar platform, the examinations and tests – in Zoom, Webinar and Moodle. All of the above suited the students and the teachers, since it is a noticeable gain in time (one joins the network class where and when it is convenient – from the office room, home, country cottage, etc.), there is no need to spend time on going to the university. However, the students and professors also pointed to some problems: no Internet, insufficient control over the conduct of classes by a teacher, etc.

The discomfort is mainly explained by the lack of “face-to-face” communication, lack of self-discipline and self-organisation skills. It should be noted that it is “face to face” communication that is the specific feature of practical classes, securing control of knowledge and achievements in foreign language – i.e. dialogical speech, debating, discussing cases in the “face to face” format, which is more effective. However, it should be noted that control of learning in the online format (Zoom) proved to be even more efficient, showing the instant result (testing students with the demonstration screen turned on). Holding tests and examinations in Zoom also proved to be convenient – students and teachers work from home.

Most of the students and teachers (59.5%) would prefer the elements of distance learning to be used even after the pandemic. The same pros and cons are characteristic of the second question, like in the answer to the previous question.

Analysing the answers to the third question, it is possible to say that the feelings connected with the distance learning are associated with the problems of two types – technical/technological (no Internet, connection failure in Zoom, inability to use these platforms) and organisational/pedagogical (the student is not able to concentrate, self-organise himself in home conditions; the pedagogue is not able to explain, to guide). Among the faced problems, the students also mentioned increased scope of home assignments, the teachers – increased time needed for organisation of labour and grading students' work.

In general, three models of the possible learning process can be distinguished in the post-pandemic period, as based on the survey results. The first is the traditional distance learning model which involves remote education based on digital information and education environment (realised in asynchronous mode). In fact, it is a traditional extramural training.

The second model is remote contact learning involving the electronic educational environment of a particular university (synchronous mode).

The third model is blended learning, where a combination of remote and traditional formats is possible. It should be noted that this model seems to be the most effective and practical, as evidenced by the survey held with the participation of students and teachers and confirmed by the authors' own experience during the pandemic.

5 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly caused a number of changes in the higher education system of Russia; it revealed and identified various problems and drawbacks of both the traditional format of teaching at higher education institutions (including foreign language teaching) and distance learning. The problems can be divided into two categories: technical/technological (no Internet, connection failure in Zoom, inability to use these platforms) and organisational/pedagogical (the student is not able to concentrate, self-organise himself in home conditions; the pedagogue is not able to explain, to guide). Among the faced problems, the students also mentioned increased scope of home assignments, the teachers – increased time needed for organisation of labour and grading students' work. The second category of problems that are characteristic specifically of foreign language teaching at higher educational establishments includes the lack of “face to face” communication, which complicates the performance of particular types of work.

The analysis of the new educational problems in the conditions of the pandemic, as carried out by the example of teaching foreign languages at Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, suggests that distance learning may be considered in the system of basic university education as a form that strengthens and complements the socio-pedagogical, organisational and psychological potential of the traditional learning format. Talking of the modern system of university education in Russia, it is necessary to provide for a combination of forms, methods and means of traditional and distance dialogue of educational process participants. This can be considered as a solution to the problems that have arisen in learning during the pandemic. Thus it may be concluded that the general didactic principle of learning should be considered in modern didactics through the combination and interaction of real and virtual space forms. This principle is aimed at realising and identifying the psychological and pedagogical potential of the information and education environment and distance learning technologies within the system of education at Russian universities.

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