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ELECTRONIC EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM RESOURCES AS A BASIS OF STUDENTS' PROJECT ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

The article considers research of online educational platforms as an effective way of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in non-philological classroom. It is suggested that the mentioned digital resources can be efficiently used in the framework of project activities. The article gives characteristics of project work as a way to increase students' motivation in mastering a foreign language. Special attention is paid to the question whether and in what way educational platforms may be implemented as a basis for introducing project methods into the EFL-teaching and learning process, teacher-student and student-student interaction. To answer this question, the article analyzes the content and specific features of several widely recognized platforms, such as Coursera, Udemy, edX and others. It also performs a detailed strategy which was put into practice in a separate group of students at Financial University, Russia. The results of project work based on taking up online educational courses in English have proved the efficiency of the approach suggested. The article concludes that implementation of students' project activities based on electronic educational platform resources in the EFL-classroom develops language skills and soft skills and works as a strongly motivating factor to learn a foreign language for professional communication.

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Keywords: Project activities, educational platform, online resource, motivation, EFL classroom.



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1. Introduction

One of the key points of modern EFL-teaching methodology is project training, aimed at developing students' cognitive and creative skills, the ability to structure their knowledge and navigate the information space, as well as at building critical thinking skills. The project method is a teaching technology based on modelling of social interaction in small groups in the framework of the educational process.

Following Thomas (2009), professor of Birmingham University, we consider this method an educational model in which training is organized around a project – a complex task that encourages students to complete creative activities aimed at solving a certain problem. The project method stimulates research activity, which allows students to work autonomously within a specified period of time individually or in groups, and to present the results of this work in a certain tangible form.

The implementation of project activities in a foreign language classroom covers three main stages: the initial classroom stage, the subsequent stage of independent work and the final stage of the research results presentation. A number of researchers, examining these stages in detail, divide them into more specific components (Beckett, 2006; Fried-Booth, 2002; Pham, 2018). In this research, we follow Alan and Stoller (2005) who talk about ten stages of the project:

1. The teacher and students determine the topic of the study.
2. The teacher and students determine the final goal of the study and the form of the results of this study.
3. The teacher and students discuss the structure of the project.
4. The teacher explains the requirements concerning language tools in the framework of the project, as well as methods for finding information necessary for the project.
5. The students collect information.
6. The teacher explains the criteria for generalizing and analyzing the information received.
7. The students summarize and analyze the information collected.
8. The teacher explains the criteria for the final results presentation.
9. The students present their final results of the project activities done.
10. The teacher and students complete the joint assessment of the results.

Russian methodologists, when carrying out research on project activities, are also concentrated on their subject domain and highlight two main types projects (Polat, 2003). The first type is called monoprospects, which are usually held within the framework of one subject, suggesting the choice of topics that are difficult to develop and study. For example, in the field of teaching a foreign language to non-philological audience, such topics may be connected with regional geographic, social, or historical issues. The second type includes interdisciplinary projects that can be carried out both within the classroom framework and involve independent extracurricular training. Any of these types can be efficiently used in EFL-teaching to increase students' motivation as an essential element of successful FL-mastering, involving the development of linguistic self-confidence (Soloveva 2012), and organize teacher-student and student-student interaction.

2. Problem Statement

Studying a foreign language in a non-philological classroom usually has a purely utilitarian nature: the language is studied to communicate effectively in the field of the future profession. However, teaching aids included in the curriculum of a foreign language course do not always imply a complete coverage of relevant topics related to the professional field of students. The use of such tools as courses of leading educational organizations, hosted on specialized platforms, as part of the implementation of project activities, can be an effective way to solve this problem. We put the importance of such courses under investigation, primarily due to their relevant authentic video materials as a worldly recognized means of increasing motivation and the development of listening comprehension skills (Baeva, 2017; Kim, 2015; Metruk, 2018). Below we consider the main characteristics of some popular educational platforms, as well as the advantages of each one of these resources.

3. Research Questions

The resources of the aforementioned platforms are an autonomous educational product, the development of which has its own methods and goals. Thus, the main question that arises is whether and in what way they can be used as a basis for introducing project methods into the EFL-teaching and learning process. To answer this question, we have analyzed the content and the specific features of several recognized platforms.

3.1. Coursera as the most popular foreign online educational platform in Russia

The **Coursera** platform (coursera.org, 2020) is a project in the field of mass online education, collaborating with leading world universities that publish and conduct courses in various fields of knowledge in the digital way. Students take up courses, communicate with fellow students, do tests and exams directly on the Coursera website or through the official mobile application for iPhone and Android.

The project includes courses in physics, engineering, humanities and art, medicine, biology, mathematics, computer science, economics and business. The duration of a course is approximately from six to ten weeks, with 1-2 hours of video lectures per week; the courses contain assignments, weekly exercises and sometimes a final project or exam.

Why is Coursera so top-requested among people of different ages and professionals of different qualifications? Unlike many other projects, it offers not only lectures, but full courses that include video lectures with subtitles, text summaries, homework, tests, and final exams. Access to courses is limited in time, and each homework or test should be presented only within a certain period. At the end of a course, its students receive a certificate of completion, in case they have successfully done the tasks and passed the final exam. Coursera resources can often act as an alternative form of classical education, thus, in a number of educational institutions (in case certain conditions have been observed), the results of these courses can be counted as part of the curriculum completion.

3.2. An overview of other platforms and their advantages

Besides Coursera, an EFL-teacher may offer a number of other e-learning platforms designed for professionals and students specialized in a wide variety of subjects. For example, **Udemy** is a resource used by more than 50 million students and 57,000 teachers (the data were taken from the Udemy website in April 2020), who conduct courses in more than 65 languages (udemy.com, 2020). Generally, more than 295 million students have been registered here. Udemy allows teachers to create online courses on topics of their choice: using the Udemy course development tools, they can download videos, PowerPoint presentations, PDF files, audio and ZIP files, etc. in real time. In addition, teachers can also interact with the users through online forums. The platform offers courses on various subjects, including business and entrepreneurship, academic sciences, art, health and fitness, language, music and technology. A large number of classes are devoted to utilitarian practical aspects, such as, for example, using Excel software and others.

EdX is a Mass Open Online Courses Provider (MOOC) that organizes university-level online courses in a wide range of disciplines for students around the world (edx.org, 2020). EdX courses consist of weekly tutorials that include short videos interspersed with interactive learning exercises that allow students to immediately practice the knowledge gained from the video lecture. The courses often include instructional videos in the format of small discussion groups. The course components can be found in online textbooks and forums, where students post questions and follow the answers and comments received by course leaders and participants. There are also online laboratories that allow students to create virtual diagrams.

Khan Academy is a nonprofit educational organization created in 2008 by a graduate of MIT and Harvard Salman Khan (khanacademy.org, 2020). The resource provides access to a collection of more than 4,200 free micro-lectures in mathematics, history, healthcare and medicine, finance, physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, economics, cosmology, organic chemistry, the basics of American citizenship, art history, macro- and microeconomics, and computer science.

Finally, we would like to mention **Skillshare** – an American online community that publishes educational videos for people who want to get acquainted with a certain field of knowledge or master certain skills (skillshare.com, 2020). Most of the courses are based on the direct interaction of the lecturer and students. The main categories of courses include design, entrepreneurship, lifestyle and technology. It should be mentioned, however, that unlike the previously described platforms, Skillshare resources are not a classical academic project, they look more like professional workshops.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study was to prove that online educational platforms of the kind presented can be an excellent basis for implementing project activities into the EFL-teaching and learning process in non-philological classroom. To fulfill this aim we have stated the following tasks:

- 1) to work out a strategy for using the resources of English-language educational platforms as the basis for the project activities;

- 2) to carry out an experiment among first-year students specialized in economic security at the Faculty of Risk Analysis and Economic Security of Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation in the framework of the EFL discipline;
- 3) to study the impact of project activities organized with the help of online educational platforms on student motivation.

5. Research Methods

The purpose of the experiment was to identify the impact of project activities in general, as well as various online tools on which they are based, on the level of educational motivation of students, the degree of their educational awareness and satisfaction with the educational process. The experiment was attended by 30 first-year students of various EFL levels, according to the CERF scale (from A2 to B1).

In the framework of the experiment, its participants were asked to take up a course of suitable duration on one of the subjects selected by the teacher in order to prepare an interactive project based on the information learned (detailed presentation, video presentation, interactive workshop, etc.). Implementation of the project work based on an educational platform from the teacher's list was carried out on the basis of the plan proposed by Alan and Stroller and performed in the introduction of our study. To the main ten stages described above, we added an informational preparatory stage (Stage 0). Below one can see is a detailed strategy of what teachers and students should do at each of the eleven stages to efficiently fulfil the purpose.

Stage 0. The teacher explains to the students the essence of project training, talks about the main educational platforms, gives their comparative characteristics, and conducts a short introductory course in working with the selected platforms.

Stage 1. The teacher suggests that each student choose one course from the proposed list; whereas the subjects of the courses are similar (not identical), it is possible to choose several educational platforms.

Stage 2. The teacher and the students determine together the final goal of working with educational resources and the form of the results of their study.

Stage 3. The teacher and the students discuss the structure of the project.

Step 4. The teacher explains to the students the requirements applicable to language tools in the framework of the project, introduces the methods of compiling subject glossaries necessary for successful work on the project.

Step 5. The students collect information by completing the video course and the tasks necessary for its successful development; they make notes of the information received for the purposes of further work.

Stage 6. The teacher advises the steps and explains the criteria for summarizing and analyzing the information received: after all the students complete the courses selected, the teacher unites them into project groups based on the similarity of the subjects of the courses taken. The students prepare a joint project by consolidating and revising the information received by each of the group members independently.

Stage 7. The students summarize and analyze the information collected, and it is assumed that students who have different levels of language training will work together.

Stage 8. The teacher explains how the presentation of the project results can be presented and advises the students of the criteria for this activity.

Stage 9. The students present the final results of their project activity in the format of presentations, including video materials and tests, based on the Google docs, Kahoot platforms, etc.

Stage 10. Joint assessment of the results, which may include a discussion of the results of activities in a round table format, a joint reflection on the experience gained, a discussion of difficulties that students might have faced when carrying out the project assignment, and ways to tackling such difficulties.

6. Findings

All the participants who took part in the experiment gave positive feedback on the algorithm (or strategy of the project work) offered. They pointed out the following results, which helped them increase motivation to study English as a foreign language for professional purposes:

- 1) improvement of their current language abilities and skills related to listening to non-adapted professional-grade audio material (78%);
- 2) a significant expansion of their general and professional vocabulary in English (82%);
- 3) development of competencies related to text construction, stylistic text processing, and the selection of adequate language material in various communication situations (73%);
- 4) development of skills of prepared and unprepared speech including “mastering skills of working with information” (85%), “improved teamwork skills (76%)”, “improving presentation skills” (86%);
- 5) development of time management skills (64%);
- 6) increase of their interest in the professionally-oriented topics studied (77%) and in the educational process itself (60%).

Among the difficulties that were discussed at the post-presentation stage, the students mentioned the fact that their projects had involved a comprehensive study over a rather long period of time (2 months). Besides, as the emphasis on the direct pedagogical activity of the teacher in project activities is reduced, for more than a half of the participants it was difficult to organize themselves, although they had been given all the necessary guidelines.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that the current globalization and digital reality poses a large number of complex and interesting tasks for teachers of foreign languages. Changing the nature of classroom work, the daily appearance of a large number of authentic material from various professional sources gives way to creativity development and unique educational products aimed at more effective and efficient development of students’ speech skills. In the EL-classroom, project work based on educational online platforms can be highly recommended for those who study English for professional communication purposes. The strong points of such kind of approach are as follows:

- 1) the educational activity is entirely focused on students who plan and perform tasks, and then present the results;
- 2) topics, problems and research questions are of interest to students, this interest is the main motivational factor in the educational process;
- 3) there is regular feedback from groupmates, an ability to exchange resources, ideas and experience throughout the work;
- 4) practical tasks are performed on the basis of modern authentic resources;
- 5) the environment of joint training and work increases motivation in contrast to the competitive environment;
- 6) the result of the work is a real product with a value that can be shared with other students, teachers or experts;
- 7) the work assessment occurs both during the intermediate stages of work, and in the course of presenting the final results of the work.

Thus, we consider the described way of project activities implementation effective, motivating and able to be easily integrated into the EFL-classroom for the audience of non-philological professional orientation. Online educational platforms as a means of project realization can be built into a wide range of educational programs, being compatible with the topics of a great variety of specialized student books, which makes them indispensable in the framework of modern English teaching methodology.

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