

**ISMGE 2020****II International Scientific and Practical Conference "Individual and Society in the  
Modern Geopolitical Environment"****DISTANCE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION.  
EXPECTATIONS VS REALITY**

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***Abstract***

The purpose of the study is to make an attempt in evaluating the process of teaching foreign languages in higher education through distance learning. Our aim is to look at the problem from the point of the participants of this process: teachers and students, and moreover, to see whether their expectations and results coincide. This paper presents the ideas disclosing the attitude towards the rising demand for e-learning in the modern education curriculum. In the framework of the article the authors would like, as an example, to consider a form of distance education as a constituent part of higher education, on the one hand, and to identify the change in the attitudes to distance education on part of postgraduates and students, on the other. The survey was carried out to present the results that show the views of potential course attendees, their positive or negative attitude to the proposed form of education, their degree of interest in it. The authors of the article do not aim to analyze in detail the existing distance education programmes.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of information and communication technologies (referred to as ICT) in the middle of the XX century led to globalization of the world, erased boundaries between countries, motivated the development of a wide range of sciences. ICT is widely applied in the educational process, gradually becoming an integral part of it and making a substantial contribution to the methodology of the educational process. With the advancement of technology the quality of services offered also changed particularly in higher education (Fetisova, 2018; Makeeva, 2015).

As mentioned above, at the present stage of development distance education is regarded as alternative education full-time. More and more educational establishments all over the world offer various distance learning programmes in Sciences, Linguistics, Teaching foreign languages and many other subjects.

## 2. Problem Statement

Since the possibility of obtaining free education has been significantly reduced, distance education has become reality. This change in education is supported by the government, for example, according to the Federal law on education of the Russian Federation № 273-FL (29.12.2012) (Federal law, 2009) distance education has been accepted officially and has an equal footing with traditional education. One of the aims supported by the government is developing Electronic Educational Environment which comprise schools, colleges institutes and universities. Alongside with this task, many universities developed a number of different educational programmes to receive desired education with minimal investments. New educational technologies are introduced extensively in Higher educational institutions in Moscow, Russia. The most popular open-source learning platform is Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) which is introduced in both universities investigated: Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) and Moscow City University (MCU).

Moodle is an open-source platform which focuses on learning online. It aims to engage students through various interactive activities. It gives a possibility of delivering content from teaches to students and back. Moodle allows the potential for major steps forward in creating a learning environment both in and outside the classroom, breaking down the physical distinction between classwork and homework. Although distant, it is considered by the researches as part of learning environment (as the component of space and time of education) (Spichko, 2009). The heart of the platform comprises numerous courses developed by the teachers and include various activities and resource materials.

One of the aims of the system is accessibility. For this reason Moodle has developed a number of strategies thus making it easy to be used by teachers and students. At present these are:

- Automatically creating individual class sites for every subject a teacher taught.
- Automatically enrolling teachers and students into each class site on Moodle, so when they first logged on, they saw their subjects.
- Linking existing teacher and student authentication details (username/password) to Moodle so they didn't have to learn a new password – their existing email account details would work just fine.

- Making Moodle accessible to students both internally on the college network, but also externally from any internet connection in the world.
- Training an initial group of teachers in how to use Moodle through the College's Professional Learning Groups (PLG), who would then be involved in the soft launch by trialling the usage of Moodle in one of their classes.
- Keeping pedagogy at the front and centre of all that was being done.

It should be noted that in order to implement such programmes into the curriculum it is necessary to determine if students are receptive to taking such online courses and are prepared to do so (Fidalgo et al., 2020) and if teachers are going to have any obstacles that may lead to barriers to the use of digital technologies in education (Mercader & Gairín, 2020).

### **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1. What is the teachers' attitude towards using Moodle in teaching foreign languages, revealing its advantages and disadvantages?
- 3.2. What is the students' attitude to studying foreign languages by distance learning?
- 3.3. Is there any difference in the attitude between two groups of respondents?
- 3.4. What advantages do students of the institutes investigated see in distance learning?
- 3.5. What disadvantages do students of the institutes investigated see in distance learning?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to make an attempt in evaluating the process of teaching foreign languages in higher education by means of distance learning using MOODLE platform in particular. Our aim is to look at the problem from the point of view of the participants of this process: teachers and students, and moreover, to see whether their expectations and results coincide. This paper presents the ideas disclosing the attitude towards the rising demand for e-learning in the modern education curriculum.

### **5. Research Methods**

A survey has been undertaken with students of Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) and Moscow City University (MCU) under 25 and mature students (postgraduates). The authors used quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The data were collected via Google document questionnaire. The aim was to see their attitude towards e-learning in general and learning a foreign language in particular. Another aim was to see the difference in the views of the participants of two groups. Thus, the survey took 48 people. 30 students were asked the following questions:

- Were/Are ICT used in the educational process? To what extent?
- Are you an attendee of any course at present?
- Can e-learning be considered as an additional way of education?
- Can e-learning be regarded as an independent way of education?
- Is it convenient for students to attend classes only for exams and tests?

- What do you think about distance education?

Postgraduate group (mature students) consisted of 18 respondents of different educational backgrounds. They were also asked to give their opinion about distance learning as one of the perspectives in their further professional growth. The youngest respondent was 28 years old, the oldest was 64 respectively. All interviewees had experience in being trained on distance courses to encourage their promotion. They discussed the following issues:

- Would it be relevant for you to use distance education at present?
- Are/Were there any technical difficulties while working on the course online?
- What forms of education would you prefer: traditional or distance?

## 6. Findings

**6.1.** In the following part of the paper we would like to present the positive and negative sides of the distance learning in general and via Moodle in particular as seen by the teacher.

By preparation and training in the Moodle system the teacher uses item collection of a course which comprises different types of activities (forums, glossaries, wikis, assignments, quizzes, choices (polls), scorm players, databases etc) and each can be customized quite a lot. By varying combinations of different elements of a course, the teacher organizes the studying process in accordance with the purposes and aims of the subject. The teacher can create and use any system of estimation within a course and set deadlines for the tasks. All marks at each course are stored in the summary sheet. Moodle also allows the teacher to control the students' attendance, activity and time of their using the system. Moodle is aimed at collaborative work, involving the participants to interact and share their knowledge in the subjects studying.

Having made an overview of the problem raised in the paper it can be said that the problem of introduction of distance learning into the educational process has attracted a lot of researchers and scholars in the last decade (Halilović et al., 2016; Pervukhin, 2013).

In the case of online courses for any attendee, it is necessary to stress that it is precisely in this form of training that requires the maximum form of motivation because control over the students is virtually practically non-existent. In this case different methods to increase learning motivation can be introduced (Lan & Hew, 2020).

Referring to existing experience, it is necessary to note the following positive and negative points of distance education in general (Avdeeva et al., 2017; Seregina, 2018) and revealed in the present research.

Let's name main positive sides of distance education on all participants of the educational process.

On part of the attendees:

- It is accessible to people, especially to those who do not have the opportunity to be educated in the traditional way.
- Distance education allows the student to choose convenient time classes: listening to lectures, participation in seminars and homework.
- Studying process can incorporate personalized learning scheme.

Without requiring large financial investments, ICT greatly reduce educational costs, reducing to a minimum the cost of distance education.

On part of the educational institution:

- High acceptance of students with minimal teaching staff, and as a result, fast recoupment rate of such an educational process.

The flexibility of the system, allowing the institution to respond to the needs of the market demands in the shortest possible time, introducing the required courses and programmes.

On part of the teachers and tutors:

- All the materials and needed data are located in one place.
- Possibility of controlling the deadline of the tasks, their format, size and other characteristics.
- Interactive communication with the students, involving individualized supervision.

Relative simplicity in creating, developing, operating and editing the courses present on the platform Moodle.

Nevertheless, a number of negative points can be also summarized and mentioned:

On part of teachers:

- Amount of time spent on using the system is not limited, thus making a teacher working 24/7.

The courses turn out to be not protected from the legal point being present on the platform and giving access to large groups of listeners. So, the author's rights are regularly broken.

On part of the attendees:

- The lack of direct contact with the teacher.
- The absence of supervision by the teachers in many courses, which implies a high level of motivation of students.
- Impossibility to achieve high results in the educational process if not having a high degree of self-organization and self-discipline.
- Lack of communicative practice.

Proceeding from personal experience of use the Moodle platform as teachers, it should be noted that this system gives rather great opportunities to use it as an additional source of independent work within the learning of foreign languages, especially it concerns upgrading reading and writing skills. There the certain materials promoting fixing and repetition of the studied subjects and tasks for self-examination can be placed. Speaking about tasks for self-examination, first of all, these are test tasks where according to the studied material, it is necessary to choose the correct answer. Such tests are usually aimed at checking grammar and lexical material. Usually, these are tests where it is necessary to choose a suitable answer. It is the most sufficient way of practicing this aspect since it, in reality, the routine which demands the maximum quantity of time while studying. Generalizing, it can be stated that two aspects of the learning of a foreign language, grammatical and lexical, can be beneficently used in the Moodle system.

On the contrary, the quality of studying the stylistic aspect raises a lot of questions since the programme is still not able to monitor stylistically correct lexico-semantic communication. In order to control this aspect it is possible to give to the students writing compositions and essays, but checking this task is excessively time-consuming and inconvenient for the teachers because it does not give a possibility of correcting it directly in the file while working in the system. For marking the notes and recommendations it is necessary to open the other file and make all the correction work there. Students also need to open both files and to verify the mistakes and the recommendations of the teacher. Taking into account the number of the students in the group (according to the last requirements of the institutions it reaches 16 people), time expenditure on checking by the teacher is not expedient at all. Therefore, it is better to pronounce the mistakes of this kind in class to the audience so that all the students could hear them, note them down, correct and avoid making similar mistakes in their further works.

Concerning the aspect of listening, the platform gives the possibility of the wide use of materials of various types offered both by a course, and various Internet sources. These materials can be well integrated into the platform without causing special difficulties and do not demand any special knowledge of computer programmes. And the level of perception can be checked by test tasks.

However, the Moodle platform is not suitable for checking and grading the speech activity. This type of activity demands direct internal participation of the teacher. In the practical speech all earlier studied aspects – grammar, lexicon, listening skills are integrated. The ability to interpret the accumulated knowledge in the speech, especially at the beginner's stage of learning foreign languages can be done only by the teacher in face-to-face communication. It can help the student to choose the most suitable lexical units proceeding from the given material and most competently to output it in their speech. Thus, the correct speech is from the very beginning formed stylistically and the possibility of storing of incorrect examples is excluded.

One of the benefits of the system Moodle that the teacher can add links to the needed resources on the Internet or download numerous audio and video files in a foreign language. It may broaden the students' opportunities for studying: listening, repeating and pronouncing the material. We would like also to note that the development of phonological skills is extremely important. In spite of this fact, distance learning via Moodle does not control communicative skills, especially students' pronunciation skills. According to our experience while studying a foreign language much depends on the pronunciation skills and they should be strengthened alongside reading, speaking and writing skills. Incorrect pronunciation, mistakes in speed, stress and intonation may lead to misunderstanding and unsuccessful communication. But, unfortunately, such reproductive skills as listening and speaking lay in most cases beyond grading. And moreover, the students are deprived of the main thing – quick control over the educational process, which is especially necessary at implementation of work of students with oral exercises and tasks. So we can state that the sphere of practicing and brushing the speaking and listening skills can be only controlled in a traditional way unless some other techniques introduced into the Moodle system.

**6.2.** In this part of the paper the attendees' points of view are presented based on the obtained and analyzed data.

According to the survey the results identified are the following:

- All respondents ever used ICTS in their education.
- All the students were attendees of Moodle.
- All respondents positively graded the possibility of obtaining additional education in the form of distance learning.
- 70 % marked e-learning as an additional way of getting education.
- 40% of students agreed to take exams and classes in the distant way thus 60% preferred to attend classes and exams traditionally.
- As the positive point of e-learning all respondents identified the possibility of not attending classes.
- 70% of respondents of the second group (mature students) would prefer to use e-learning for their professional growth.
- Flexible time of the classes during using e-learning was accepted by all the respondents.
- All respondents noted the comparative availability of the courses.
- 30% of the interviewees mentioned as extremely uncomfortable such online courses in which you can participate only in real-time.
- Over 70% of respondents mentioned as a negative moment the lack of direct contact with the teacher.
- Over 50% stated the lack of control on the part of the teacher that dissatisfies them.
- All respondents stated that if blended learning is organized professionally then it can be acceptable.

As it is observable, the results of the questionnaire show that distance learning is preferred to on-campus learning with the group of respondents.

One of the most surprising outcomes is the contradictory answer concerning attendance of the university. On the one hand, participants appreciate the possibility of not being present in class studying via Moodle but, on the other hand, the participants want to attend classes.

The similarity in the answers of the investigated groups to the question about the distance education and its usage shows that people are ready to spend their time on achieving the result but are not willing to spend more time and effort on it.

Thus, comparing and contrasting the given responses, the most unexpected answer for the authors of this article is the necessity of direct contact with the teacher. It is the fact that was important for almost all of the respondents, not taking into account their age, gender and social status. Another surprising answer considered the desire of the students to attend classes in the traditional way, despite the fact that some of them will spend over two or three hours on their way to university and back.

Analyzing the results we can state that it might be because of their anxiety while dealing with technology and low self-assurance. Some authors discussed this issue in detail (Staddon, 2020).

Naturally, the possibility of immediate communication with the teacher and peers is valued and is still in great demand. To achieve that it can be recommended to introduce different types of interaction in computer supported collaborative learning (Hernández-Sellés et al., 2020).

## 7. Conclusion

The issues concerning distance education, blended learning in general and learning foreign languages in particular, have been one of the most discussed matters in conferences, research works and scientific literature in the last few years.

In this article the basic characteristics of distant education used in Higher education have been analyzed. We have discussed the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning in Higher Education. On the one hand, it can also be stated that the demand for e-learning has risen repeatedly because it avoids the direct presence of the tutor or teacher thus allowing you to choose a convenient time and form of classes. In addition, it has been observed that the list of advantages outweighs the list of disadvantages, but, on the other hand, it is important to take into consideration real face-to-face communication with the teacher and peers which is not present in distance education. Obviously, it is necessary to add that e-learning cannot be recommended as a self-educational element in studying, especially because the role of the tutor in the learning process which is extremely important and cannot be underestimated as the results of the survey showed. It can be emphasized that collaboration between teachers and students is extremely important especially in languages studies, because it is the human factor that motivates and improves the studying in most cases, especially if we speak about the beginners.

Accessibility and flexibility of the distant courses on the part of the students always come into dissonance with the opposite side – the teachers. The teacher confronts the usage of the Moodle because of the technical stress, the lack of obtainable access to the platform on account of the limited number of devices in the institutions, and the platform now and then is overloaded and does not work properly. The Moodle system requires from the teacher sufficient expense of forces spent on preparation of sections of the new course, however, in the long run, it allows to considerably to facilitate work on a final assessment of the students. In our opinion, if the time of working via e-learning is scheduled, evaluated, graded and regulated from the part of the Board of the university, teacher and student will be using it more willingly. It is necessary that the time spent on using the system should be included in the programmes and time expenditure should be taken into consideration. Obviously, teachers will realise all the benefits of distance learning.

It is natural that distance learning programmes have gained importance among the employed academic community and mature students, though a lot of students are preferable to enlarge the amount of time spend on the traditional way of getting education which involves the teacher or tutor present at the lesson.

Finally, elements of distance learning used alongside traditional methods of educations can be beneficial. Clearly, it is due to rational usage of blended learning that the monotonous process of studying a foreign language can become varied and necessary for the participants of this process.

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