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**“OUR MOSCOW NEIGHBORS”, DISTANCE COMMUNICATIVE
PROJECT AS NEW APPROACH TO LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

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Abstract

The experience of distance learning has shown that language teaching, developed for a full-time learning format, needs to be aligned. In this regard, it seems necessary to come up with new ways to foster educational process, new approaches, programs and materials that support distance learning. The paper discusses the experience of creating and piloting a new distance communicative course entitled “Our Moscow Neighbors” and describes its features, teaching methods and teaching materials. Those constraints resulting from distance learning and hampering teachers’ ability to support a unified learning environment are overcome by an innovative approach proposed by the authors of the project “Our Moscow Neighbors”. The approach constantly encourages students to be engaged in a discourse with each other, and express different, sometimes opposite points of view on a particular problem. During a piloting phase, an individual approach that underlay the ways of giving classes within the project, showed that all students, regardless of their level of language proficiency, took part in general communications without feeling any inconvenience or embarrassment. Project activities showed that distance learning is not an obstacle to achieving the wider objective set in language teaching at the present stage, namely, teaching communication skills and abilities. Besides this, the features of online learning call for a properly organized learning environment and new ways of giving classes. The project “Our Moscow Neighbors” offers its own way of addressing these problems.

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Keywords: Act of communication, distance learning, international communicative project, language environment



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1. Introduction

“Our Moscow Neighbors”, is an international inter-university distance communicative project that appeared in the spring of 2020, at a time when almost all countries closed their borders due to the pandemic. Faced with new realities, the academic community had to search for new forms of teaching Russian as a Second Language. During this period, teachers from different countries stepped up cooperation, since distant communications helped to overcome distances and made it possible for people to meet in different parts of the world.

Likewise, “Our Moscow Neighbors” stemmed from some joint efforts sought by long-standing partners – the Institute of Russian Language and Culture of Lomonosov Moscow State University, Universidad Complutense de Madrid and the Russian House of Madrid (Elkonin, 1999).

Those studying Russian outside Russia could not immerse into the language environment, thereby finding it difficult to develop their communication skills. That is why the project “Our Moscow Neighbors”, mainly aimed at teaching foreign students to communicate in Russian, features the communicative aspect. This is the subject of properly organized classes, ways of delivering classes and learning materials selected (Maliavina, 2007).

2. Problem Statement

The distance learning experience acquired has shown that language teaching developed for a full-time format, is not entirely suitable for working online. In this regard, it seems necessary to create new methods, materials and curricula that support distance learning. Currently, teaching foreign languages has a communicative focus, and its wider objective is to teach communication in a foreign language. Obviously, the objective remains the same during the transition from full-time education to distance learning. However, the peculiarities of the latter call for the need to come up with a different approach to the educational process (Matthew, 2012). What are the ways, methods and techniques designed to make the learning process effective and allow those involved to achieve the outcomes desired?

3. Research Questions

The paper discusses the experience of creating and piloting the distance communicative course entitled “Our Moscow Neighbors”, and describes its features, teaching methods and learning materials. The innovative approach to teaching foreign languages aims to teach communication in the target language. Since the end usually determines the means, it seems obvious that communication is pivotal for the organization of foreign language classes.

At first glance, distance format hinders the teacher’s ability to create a communicative learning environment. In online classes, the teacher cannot fully control students’ attention due to the lack of a single educational space and direct contact with the group. The virtual classroom, divided into separate window spaces, is a serious obstacle that prevents the teacher from creating a communication situation in which each member of the group should be involved.

The innovative approach proposed by the authors of the project “Our Moscow Neighbors” helps to overcome this obstacle and unite the group in a single learning environment.

An important distinctive feature of classes within this project is their unusual form: classes are given **by two teachers at once**. Besides this, they do not fall into the principal teacher and assistant, but are interlocutors who update the key topics for communication.

This way of giving classes supports discussions, even if a topic initially does not encourage students to take part. The teachers elicit students to actively participate in a discourse, expressing different, sometimes opposite points of view on a particular problem (Vygotsky, 1982).

In addition, the chosen form of work in the classroom allows teachers to involve all students in the learning process, regardless of their level of language proficiency. This is especially important when training is provided in European groups that often bring together students of different levels.

The requirement of an individual approach underlies the choice of methods, techniques, pace of the class and communication with students, depending on their level of knowledge. Thus, advanced students can communicate with their teachers at the appropriate level of language proficiency, and the teacher, in turn, adapts the information received for the weaker ones who also become active participants in the conversation. Thus, not a single student drops out of the educational process (Sanchez & Hueros, 2010).

During a piloting phase, such an individual approach showed that not a single student felt any inconvenience or embarrassment in the class. On the contrary, everyone took part in the conversations with pleasure, using the amount of knowledge that they had at that time.

A two-dimensional teaching model is implemented in the learning process, when the teacher sets and solves educational tasks (grammar correction, expansion of topical vocabulary and, of course, acquaintance with the peculiarities of the Russian linguocultural consciousness), and students, in turn, solve real communication problems applying previously acquired language knowledge.

With distance learning, students are usually deprived of the opportunity to use the language they are learning as a means of real discourse. During classes at their universities, they mainly perform language and pre-speech tasks that are undoubtedly an integral part of learning process, but are only a means to achieve the wider objective – the ability to communicate in the target language.

“Our Moscow Neighbors” is geared to scale up knowledge and put it into practice, because the students, having taken on the role of neighbors, tackle pressing issues and discuss topics of everyone’s concern. Thus, students are immersed in the cultural and linguistic society.

The topics selected for the project are relevant and arouse students’ keen interest and desire to discuss them.

They were compiled based on the survey feedback from the students participating in the project. They included both traditional (personal introduction, holidays, national character, etc.) and more original topics (relations between neighbors, unexpected situations on the roads, national dream and Russian summer cottage traditions). All of them were piloted among Spanish, Greek and South Korean students (about 200 participants). The flexibility in choosing topics allows teachers to change them quantitatively and meaningfully, subject to the characteristics of the audience and the specifics of the course as such (Ryzhikh, 2020).

4. Purpose of the Study

The wider objective pursued by any RSL teacher in the class is to create a natural speech situation. The classes within the project organized in such a way as to encourage students to do any task in a team constantly promote natural speech situations that arise even more often than during offline classes.

The teachers involve their students in communication, during which each of them has the opportunity to express their own point of view. To do this, the students call forth all the knowledge and skills acquired earlier.

5. Research Methods

To achieve the overall objective of the project, the following methods and techniques were used:

- sociocultural immersion,
- “live” texts,
- authentic videos and visuals,
- dramatization and communicative role playing,
- provocation, etc.

Language does not exist outside of culture. It is a reflection of national mental features in the perception of the surrounding world. This thesis underpins the conception of sociocultural immersion, which is the basis for the “Our Moscow Neighbors”. Topics for discussion are proposed as being of general human importance, but meaningfully reflecting the national features. The project provides an overview of the regional and cultural diversity of Russian life. In this regard, great attention is paid to the selection of learning materials that are relevant, flexible and challenging. They are compiled into the manual “Our Moscow Neighbors” that was successfully piloted and published at the end of 2020.

The teaching kit includes “live” texts, original exercises and authentic videos related to the topic of the classes. The manual is available in both paper and electronic form. It is bright and user-friendly, containing links to educational audio and video materials. The students who prefer using smartphones can have QR codes.

The manual specifically features flexibility. Study materials are organized in such a way that, while remaining within the framework of one topic, can be updated, retaining their relevance, and adapted to the level of students.

Another important technique is **dramatization** that is implemented within the project in various kinds of **communicative role games**. The main task of dramatization is to remove all sorts of barriers that slow down the assimilation of learning material by students in the target language or completely impede this process. With this technique, the language for the learner is no longer a subject of study, but a tool enabling to solve real communication problems.

Example task:

Act out the following situations in the group. Introduce yourself:

- *You are on an airplane. Sitting next to a young woman with her five-year-old son.*
- *You are visiting Ivan. Your friend’s grandparents enter the room.*

An effective instructional technique for creating a natural speech situation is undoubtedly a **provocation** that elicits students to be involved in classroom activities, encouraging them to speak out.

Example task:

Read the statements and give your opinion:

- *The importance of education in society is decreasing, now skills and experience are needed, not knowledge.*
- *Without higher education, a person is doomed to low-paid and non-prestigious jobs.*
- *Today the significance of higher education is greatly exaggerated, without it, you can also succeed in life and fix your ambition.*

6. Findings

The materials of the project were piloted in the framework of RSL intensive courses with students:

- Madrid House in Russia (May–July 2020);
- Russian Center for Science and Culture in Athens (Greece) (October–December 2020);
- Russian Center for Science and Culture Damascus (Syria) (October 2020);
- South Korean National Gyeongbuk University (January–March 2021);
- Universidad Complutense de Madrid (February 2021).

The piloting phase involved 315 people. Upon completion, 28 Spanish students successfully passed the TORFL exam (levels A2-C1). In September 2020, one of the participants entered the Faculty of Translation of Lomonosov Moscow State University. The authors of the project got numerous positive reviews and words of gratitude from the participants of the course and their teachers.

7. Conclusion

The project showed that distance learning is not an obstacle to achieving the objective that is set in the process of teaching foreign languages at the present stage, namely, teaching communication skills and habits.

At the same time, online features require a properly organized learning environment and new ways of giving classes. The project “Our Moscow Neighbors” offers its own way of addressing these challenges.

An innovative way of giving classes by two teachers enables a common educational environment, involving all students in the communication process, and thus creating a natural speech situation that steps up students’ current language progress and acquires new knowledge in the course of communication.

This form of work results in individualized training, creating a situation when all students take part, regardless of their level of language proficiency.

The system of tasks, developed by the authors of the project, addresses another problem of no small importance for students – preparation for the TORFL exam from B1 to C2 levels. The project “Our Moscow Neighbors” offers exercises to prepare for the speaking and listening parts and correlates with model tests in the Russian language within the TORFL framework.

An important feature of the project is that language learning takes place in the form of a pleasant friendly conversation. The psychological attitude towards positive, benevolent communication turns all participants in the class into good neighbors. Thanks to this attitude, the students' mood improves and there is an additional incentive to learn the language.

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