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**TEACHER TRAINING: PROS AND CONS OF DISTANCE
EDUCATION THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES**

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Abstract

In accordance with the Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation order in February 2018, the implementation of various educational programs calls for the use of educational technologies such as e-learning and distance technology. As for the distance technology, its application in the academic process, undoubtedly, contributes to the development and mastery of the students' independent work skills. The article discusses distance learning as one of the options for undergraduate students' independent work structuring. It presents the course and results of the experiment on distance learning technology implementation in Transbaikal State University. During the experiment, prospective teachers of foreign languages examined the effectiveness of distance learning at university. As a result, several observations were made regarding the quality and effectiveness of distance learning implementation. They can prove serviceable in the present revision of the distance learning possibilities and influence the development of enhanced methods for the organization of such an activity. The present article focuses on the students' insights into the possibility of using distance technology in the learning process and their cause-result analysis. The university students consider distance learning technology as modern and progressive; moreover, they recognize its potential for the instructional materials enhancement. However, distance learning implementation should be thoroughly thought out and integrated into the traditional academic system and not considered as an alternative to it.

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Keywords: Distance learning, experiment, online education, teacher training.



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1. Introduction

The use of the distance learning technology undoubtedly makes higher education more accessible and flexible; it provides numerous opportunities for gaining and broadening knowledge. What is more, it assists students in meeting the society's expectations (Beketova et al., 2020). Presently, vocational training should be aimed at educating people, capable of lifelong learning, goal setting, problem solving and possessing leadership qualities. Moreover, modern-day students speculate a lot about the need of providing them with more considerable independence. They stress the necessity of using distance technology in the educative process as it promotes self-planning and provides flexible knowledge acquisition; insist on re-adjusting learning and teaching practices to comply with the 21st-century requirements (Zhang et al., 2019, p.85), because technology is a significant catalyst making distance learning "a part of the mainstream education" (Bozkurt, 2019).

Undoubtedly, it is imperative to notice that distance learning inherently tends to lead to such beneficial results as a higher-order thinking, improved knowledge transfer, greater motivation to succeed, better social and cognitive development; however, it requires more time spent on practice and solving proposed problems. These results imply reduction in stereotypes and prejudices, deeper understanding of the diversity, development of social skills and improved quality of the learning environment. Furthermore, distance technologies implemented in schools may strengthen the teamwork (Stoytcheva, 2018). They promote collaborative work on authentic project tasks and develop skills necessary for the teamwork. Moreover, an employee's skill to work distantly is held in high demand at present. People need to know how to collaborate remotely and should have already developed skills. Thus, simulating such an interaction in higher education will have tangible benefits. Educating students about distance learning provides them with an opportunity to develop qualities essential for modern professionals (Mahlangu, 2018). The current situation with its boost of online learning and distance work has already confirmed the assumption that it is important to be a clear and an effective communicator familiar with technologies that allow you to team up in various modes.

Distance learning is a technology which allows attaining the stated goals. However, it has its own advantages and disadvantages which should be taken into consideration when implementing it (Vimbi, 2018; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Niwaz et al., 2019).

2. Problem Statement

A new look at the distance technology is built on the assumption that this technology allows efficiently organizing students' independent research activities under professors' guidance, hence contributing to the innovations in the educational process. The constant search for a universal and interactive training model that suits all participants is conducive to this technology popularity. Moreover, methodologists indicate that students using distance learning, despite the spatial distance from the professor, have a constant opportunity to maintain dialogue with him/her in the virtual space (Ovsyannikov, 2001; Sadeghi, 2019; Solovov, 2000; Tikhomirov, 1996). Thus, one of the prime concerns of distance learning opponents that students are left all by themselves within the distance learning paradigm appears to be rebuffed.

It should be emphasized that distance learning represents a relatively neoteric form of training that has been dynamically adapting to contemporary conditions (Lenar et al., 2014). Faculties of foreign languages have notoriously been prone to limiting distance and correspondence forms of training for a long time because the traditional framework of students-professors meetings during the class has been thought of as indispensable for quality learning. In recent years, it has become possible to utilize online technologies for teaching foreign languages and, as a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic (2019-2020), these technologies have undergone battle testing.

Unlike other forms of distance learning, such as correspondence courses and Open University, considered to be its predecessors (Holmberg, 1991), online training is easily accessible, highly flexible and exceedingly informative having extensive databases on-hand. However, methodological quality of the materials as well as professors' skills in adapting to new modes of presentation is of paramount importance in distance learning (Lüftenegger et al., 2012; Markova et al., 2017). Croft et al. (2010) point out that the delivery of course programs presents a major challenge for professors engaged in distance learning.

3. Research Questions

Taking into account the indicated efficiency and the necessity for teacher training colleges students to be able to implement distance learning technologies, their study should be included in the content of "Theory and Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages" (TMTFL), being one of the leading pedagogical disciplines. The primary aim of this discipline is to prepare students for foreign language lessons independent design and organization and understanding of their idiosyncrasy through the knowledge of all the elements of the educational process system. The mastery of this discipline involves students' professional and methodical competence development and readiness to teach a foreign language in a secondary school.

During the fall semester of 2019-2020 academic year, fourth-year students of the Department of European Languages and Linguodidactics took part in the experiment on distance learning technology implementation in Transbaikal State University. During the experiment, prospective teachers of foreign languages examined the effectiveness of the distance learning at university. During the TMTFL classes the students of our university had a chance to learn and teach using distance technology. This experiment was conducted to investigate the following issues:

- How ready is the University for distance learning?
- How ready are the students for distance learning/teaching?
- Is technical readiness and knowledge enough for well-organized distance learning?
- How necessary is distance learning in the contemporary world?

4. Purpose of the Study

Although distance learning is clearly relevant in the current socioeconomic conditions, its implementation in various educational institutions leaves much to be desired (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Joohaekim & Kim, 2007; Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Palvia et al., 2018). The analysis of the

students' internships in secondary schools of our city (Chita, Zabaikalsky Krai, Russia) allows us to state that quite a lot of students expect to receive ready-made information from the professors, remaining relatively inactive in the academic process; furthermore, they demonstrate little inclination to study independently. In addition, students note that foreign language teachers make little use of modern technology in the classroom and during students' independent work in schools. To understand better how to put into practice distance learning in a secondary school, it is necessary not only to theoretically study it, but also to implement it practically in the learning process. In this regard, it has become imperative to examine this technology as a part of the discipline TMTFL.

The purpose of this study is to support the implementation of modern educational skills related to distance learning. It has determined the following tasks:

- to consider distance technology as an activity conducive to progressive thinking that responds to modern challenges;
- to research the technology from the point of new methods and training tools introduction effectiveness;
- to motivate the creation of a learning environment that encourages students to experiment with innovative methods and practices;
- to examine students' attitude toward distance learning as a way of independent work organization.

5. Research Methods

The choice of the term "distance technology" is based on Lebedeva's (2011) work, which presents a typology of distance technologies and discusses their effectiveness, Polat's (2005) research, which studies in detail distance learning technologies, Vardanyan's (2013) work on the application of distance learning technologies to individuate the learning process, as well as Otekina's (2017) research, examining the ways of distance learning technologies use in modern educational system.

In scientific publications of recent years distance technology is considered either as a technology or as a form of training (Kislukhina, 2017). In this paper we take the view that distance technology is a relatively novel approach to the organization of education using primarily online resources.

Choosing a research methodology, we were guided by the ideas of the systematic, personal, and competency-based approaches. The systematic approach is expressed in the fact that distance learning is considered as an integral complex of interrelated elements, including the goal, content, form, and subjectivity of the academic process. The personal approach takes into account the uniqueness, moral and intellectual freedom of each participant in the educational process, with the emphasis on the student-teacher interaction priority. A competency-based approach involves the implementation of both universal (development and implementation of projects, self-organization, teamwork), and professional (building an educational environment, monitoring and evaluating academic results, interacting with participants in the educational space) competencies within the framework of the current Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education. The foundational research method was an experiment followed by questioning and analysis of the data results.

The conducted experiment had three stages. Its first stage was devoted to methodological questions: the study and analysis of the methodological foundations of organizing distance learning at university, the development of the content of the experimental work summative stage. During this stage, the students and the professors evaluated the idea of distance learning technologies use practicability when organizing students' independent work within the framework of the theoretical discipline TMTFL. During the second stage, firstly, the teaching materials were prepared and analyzed; secondly, a survey of students was conducted. At the second stage the possibility of distance work was tested in groups when executing a project. The significance of students' personal learning experience as the most fundamental criterion was taken into account (Pozzi et al., 2019). The results were analyzed and summarized during the third stage. We will concentrate mostly on the students' assessment of the technology in this part of the paper.

Our experiment involved the supervision of two groups of fourth-year students (30 students), aged 20-22, studying TMTFL as their principle subject, with an approximately uniform academic performance over a period of two months. The experiment presupposed students' introduction to the distance learning technology, its unmediated use, and analysis of the obtained results in order to conceive a generalized idea of organizing such a mode of learning at school when teaching foreign languages. The experimental group worked with the distance technology; whereas the control group carried out their work according to the traditional method. In two months, the students underwent a survey and an interview to evaluate the obtained results.

6. Findings

During the experiment within a relatively short period the students had a unique chance of studying how to teach and learn with the distance technology, making use of additional opportunities to stimulate their creative thinking, building awareness of the significance of the independent work, exercising self-control and reflecting over their activities. The professors involved in this experiment acquired a possibility of evaluating students' classroom and extracurricular work, more efficiently structuring independent study and understanding the importance of tutorials as a teaching method. This allowed comparing and contrasting an interactive educational environment which differs in its quality from the classical one with the traditional educational process (Masalimova et al., 2014, p. 1125). Observation of the students' progress, monitoring and providing efficient feedback are fundamental professors' duties which ensure that students remain engaged and involved (Roddy et al., 2017).

Experimental results revealed a contradiction between the practices of a real learning process and the need for the implementation of distance technologies in higher education: on the one hand, we deal with a considerable potential of the technology in the field of education; on the other hand, the level of efficiency of its use leaves much to be desired so far, raising the issue of psychological and methodological unreadiness for the process.

To clarify the students' attitude to the possibility of using distance technology in the learning process, a survey and a semi-structured personal interview were conducted. The participants were asked to answer the following questions:

1. How are modern technologies implemented at the Faculty?
2. Do you use electronic textbooks when studying and teaching?
3. Do you consider active use of distance technology as the key to the educational process intensification?
4. Is the distance system acceptable for gaining knowledge of the subject? Why?
5. Do you consider the provided methodological support when using this technology efficient? Why?
6. What difficulties did you encounter while working with this technology?
7. How ready are you to organize the distance learning at school today?
8. Previously you have indicated a need for greater freedom to choose a method of obtaining information and presenting it. Have you changed your point of view?

When answering the first question, 91% of students noted that the faculty had good conditions for employing technology in the educational process; 9% of respondents were more or less dissatisfied with the use of the technologies in the classroom.

76% of respondents answered positively to the second question; 17% emphasized that it was mandatory to combine electronic textbooks with paper academic materials; 7% reacted unfavourably.

The following answers were received to the third question: before the experiment, there was a belief in the effectiveness of the independent distance learning work; after the experiment, the students were less optimistic having carried out self-reflection and analysis. The reasons for the lack of desire to work independently were the following: they would prefer to have sufficiently more tutorials; they acknowledged deficient preparation for working online and little experience with computer-based training systems and, as a result, incompetence in using them. Being digital natives, they failed to transfer their existing skills to the educational environment.

To the fourth question, as one would expect from a modern-day student audience, the majority of respondents answered that the use of up-to-date teaching technologies would enhance the educative process, with 72% of respondents indicating that their use helped to improve the quality of education.

When answering the fifth question, the majority of respondents (85%) stated that they had little experience of independent work of such kind, which affected the quality of the selected material for the assignment; not much experience with online resources which as teachers-to-be they should have had. Students got used to the professors' selecting course content in class, providing them with detailed instructions on how to carry out every task, so independent tasks during a class were performed easily. When it came to the long-term independent work, regimentation of knowledge, independent time regulation, all these caused considerable difficulties.

Responding to the sixth question, almost all students (98%) expressed an opinion that the classroom training when studying the humanities was better organized because of continuous exchange of views with the professors. 2% of the respondents indicated that consulting organized by the professor during the experiment provided the necessary assistance, but lacked the emotional component, which was always present during the class work. 67% noted that there should be more project tasks, but they do not have to be obligatory distant.

As we have already noted, during the experiment the attitude towards distance learning changed. While appreciating all its advantages, a conviction has come to the fore that if there is a possibility of regular classes, it should be used, especially for school students. This confirmed the idea that “the combination of traditional learning with e-learning which includes distance support provides higher quality of organization of training” (Sokova et al., 2016, p. 82).

It turned out that the majority of the respondents, 85%, indicated increased difficulties in self-study and understanding of the educational material. In our opinion, this is due to the reluctance to reflect, compare, and draw conclusions independently. These types of activities, as long ago, are carried out by school teachers and university professors. Therefore, faced with the task of highlighting important information, systemizing the material and completely independently preparing for the lesson, almost everyone experienced difficulties, and turned to the professor for a piece of advice. As a result, students seemed dissatisfied with their results and found their independent work not effective enough. Thus, the necessity of “mixed” type of learning was confirmed (Leontyeva, 2018).

To the seventh question of the questionnaire, the respondents answered that they were not convinced in the effectiveness of a widespread adoption of distance learning not only at secondary schools, but also at universities as well (56%); 34% believed that school students, especially in the lower grades, should not use this technology at all, since they needed perpetual guidance by a teacher. Nevertheless, 10% believed that the future belonged to this technology, and it was necessary to develop and apply it in the educational process both at secondary and higher schools.

According to the respondents, the leading reasons for the lack of effectiveness in the field of independent work carried out by means of the distance learning are as follows: an insignificant number of software products that assist in regulating working time and shaping a consulting procedure and little accountability for the quality of the performed work. However, while complaining about the shortage of the habitual guidance, the students asserted that excessive professor’s concerns did not contribute to the development of students’ responsibility for the learning process.

The most difficult to answer was the eighth question of the questionnaire. Realizing that in-class work consists of many parameters compared with distance learning, the students noted that the principle of individualization of learning was less implemented in the technology (Eremeev, 2014). When working distantly, professors deal with a more abstract, averaged type of students, because they cannot observe how the process of reflection and coming to the decision is being accomplished. Despite the fact that the students are following the professors’ plan, they are not constantly on the same emotional and knowledge page with them. Many significant pedagogical practices remain unrealized. Educational work in a team is also carried out with errors in the technology, because inside the team, without an instructor, students cannot correctly distribute responsibilities, do not want to take on leadership functions and, as a result, in the final version, either try to complete the task on their own, or try to get some additional help from the professor. The majority of the surveyed, 89%, began to comprehend the complexity of organizing work within distance learning technology, workload that additionally fell on the professors’ shoulders, lack of adequate methodological materials allowing interaction. Traditional communication in education is being lost, it is changing, and complete readiness for it is present neither among students nor among professors. Indisputably, such a model of learning can be organized, but it should be a well-thought-out model with

proper standards, plans, and training tools. More importantly, teachers and professors engaged in the distance learning should have some training and methodological support.

Finally, students' motivation for learning is closely connected with the supply of training material, professor's erudition and competence, with the practiced ability to work independently as well as with the reward system, the emotional feeling of success and competition, and the latter is likely to play a leading role. Therefore, both external and internal factors should be taken into account.

7. Conclusion

Consequently, this research has confirmed that university students consider distance learning technology as a modern and progressive one, due to its availability and cost-effectiveness; speak approvingly of it in terms of time and choice of individual pace of learning activities; moreover, students see in it a way for refinement of the methods of organizing instructional materials. However, distance learning should be thoroughly thought out and integrated into the traditional academic system and not considered as an alternative to it. The modern generation is witnessing and participating in a new incomparably complex educational global context which calls for non-standard solutions. However, education remains the basis which contributes to a new multifaceted society development and creates the environment necessary for the maturity of the creator of such a society.

When conducting this study, we did not expect how soon a real transition to the distance learning form of organizing studies would be required. In connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become possible to monitor this technology further and in detail. Exploring the current challenges generated by the lockdown, we witness a dynamic development of distance learning. It is of paramount importance, on the one hand, to see new opportunities opening for teachers and, on the other hand, to monitor the effectiveness of the distance learning technologies implementation.

The present study has identified the following issues:

1. As the survey showed, the technical side of the distance learning is the least of the existing problems which can be expected from the generation of Millennials.
2. The technical side is just one of the means within the system of teaching materials and technologies, in itself it does not improve the quality of education; much depends not only on the students who were quite self-critical, but also on the professor. Professors' personal qualities, such as motivation, desire to apply new things, keep up to date and professional qualities play a crucial role. It was proved by answers to question six where students insisted that even the most highly qualified teachers did not automatically become experts when switching to distance teaching.
3. It seems necessary to look into the roots of the following problem while 76% of the respondents display a positive attitude and willingness to learn distantly using the ready-made programs, only 56% of future teachers are willing to teach school students in this way. Moreover, 34% think that it is not necessary at school. This issue has emerged as a result of the experiment and is to be examined.

4. There should be continuity of school and university experience in working with information and communication technologies and distance learning. Conceivably, this year's applicants will exemplify such continuity.

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