

RLMSEE-2020
The Russian Language in Modern Scientific and Educational Environment
E-LEARNING OF RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FROM
STUDENT'S SIDE

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Abstract

The scope of this article is to shed light on the remote learning of Russian as a foreign language from the students' side. In the beginning we present a brief review of the literature on computer mediated communication, and how it was used for language teaching. Afterwards, we will focus on the general advantages and disadvantages of remote teaching, mainly from the point of view of the students involved in the process. Subsequently, we made a discussion about the results we got from a focus group of international students, trying to isolate the process of teaching a language, and in particular Russian as a foreign language. This analysis will provide the reader with examples of benefits and drawbacks that affect the learning process of Russian online, but which can easily be transferred to any language taught as a foreign one (L2). In the end, we try to state whether there will be a future for remote language teaching after the pandemic, following the opinion of the main actors of this process.

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1. Introduction

An infectious disease, which we watched on TV in the beginning of this year and which seemed so distant to us, has become an integral part of our life and our work. Everyone's life has adapted to the new circumstance caused by the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. None of us could have foreseen all the changes that have taken place in the recent months. In 2020, not only the private life of any individual, his approach to social activities has changed, but also the way he works and studies. What is called in Italy “smart-working” (using a pseudo-English expression of remote working) and in Russia “*distsionnaya rabota*” or “*distsionka*” has become for everyone the predominant way to do work without leaving home. Smart working or remote working has become the only way to conduct university studies in Moscow since March 16, 2020 and it is foreseen to last at least until February 2021.¹

1.1. CMC as a means of SLA

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is not an innovation in second language acquisition (SLA), though it has never been employed as a teaching method in such an extensive way as nowadays. The so-called “new normal”², is both the cause and the consequence of the new type of spreading information and science all around the world with few exceptions. Since the process is still ongoing, it makes little sense to draw conclusions on this issue at the current stage, however, we can try to give a brief review on the literature available on CMC as a means of language teaching in order to understand which were the early stages of e-learning.

The historical development of what was called by pioneer scholars CALL (computer-assisted/aided language learning), computer as a device of which practitioners of teaching must take account of, was described in 1996 (Warschauer, 1996) as a three-stage process: behavioristic, communicative, and integrative. According to the author, the first use of the computer, during the 1970s and 80s was mainly as a tutor (Taylor, 1980), as a provider of instructions for students. The communicative stage started when some scholars understood that the computer did not provide any interaction with the learner, hence the necessity to implement a new approach to the pc as a means of second language acquisition with the “Premises for ‘Communicative’ CALL” (Underwood, 1984) which provided a critic view of the use they made at that time of the computer. A remarkable model of this process is the computer as a tool (Brierley & Kemble, 1991) where programs help the learner to use or understand language. Examples of computer as a tool include word processors, spelling and grammar checkers and others. After a period of critics on the system, advances in technology contributed to the dawn of the integrative stage. Integrative approaches to CALL are based on two important technological developments of the 90s: multimedia computers and the Internet. The CD-ROM firstly allowed a variety of media (text, graphics, sound, animation and video) to be accessed on a single machine. All the multimedia resources were linked together and learners could choose their own path simply by pointing and clicking a mouse. The combination of all these resources provided a more authentic learning environment, since listening was combined with seeing, just like in the real world and integrates skills

¹ <https://d-russia.ru/minobrnauki-otpravilo-studentov-na-distancionnoe-obuchenie-do-6-fevralja-2021-goda.html>

² <https://corriereinnovazione.corriere.it/cards/nuove-espressioni-fase-2-new-normal-ghost-game-social-bubble-dad/dad.shtml>

combining reading, writing, speaking and listening in a single activity (Warschauer,1996). The author sees the internet, which started also to be used in the 90s, as the further step of the last stage of CALL. He gives examples of how the Internet, combined with other technologies, was used to help create an integrated communicative environment for English as a foreign in Bulgaria where since then, students had little contact with the English-speaking world (Meskill & Rangelova, 1995). These stages refer to the human-computer interactions, where learners use special software or online resources to learn a second language (L2). However, the scope of this article will be to focus on the human-computer-human interaction where practitioners and students experience a quasi-real communication with each other for learning purposes from the students' side, and as a form of remote working from the side of the lecturers. Furthermore, we ought to explain the difference between asynchronous and synchronous CMC. The former includes emails, chats, focuses on what is written, and answered at any time, the latter includes video calls, video conferences and whatever supports a quasi-real live contact. Therefore, to point out the process we are going to discuss about, we should remind the reader that it is about human-computer-human communication, mostly synchronous, though an intensive use of mails and chat is also in place, and that it is not a matter of self-choice by the players involved, but a sine qua non to keep the transfer of knowledge during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Problem Statement

Educational institutions had to adjust the teaching process, lesson plan and, consequently, the work schedule, in a relatively short span of time, according to the new requirements necessary to prevent the spread of the pandemic. This meant a huge investment in time and technology for the institution itself and for practitioners involved in teaching. On the teacher's side there was a considerable effort to get the knowledge and the instruments required to keep the teaching process on CMC. On the student's side the effort was less complicated since they are more acquainted with mobile devices, and they do not need to show themselves all the time during the lesson. In the beginning there was a certain flexibility in the process from both sides (lecturers' and students'), because of the relative lack of know-how, constituting a sort of grey zone of students and lecturers who were not fully able to implement a remote teaching process. Now it is clear that remote learning is the only possible way to study at the university, at least in Moscow, and institutions make considerable efforts to supervise the work of their employees. We observe a process of normalization of the remote learning, as well as other new habits related to the pandemic, hence we think that there should be a room for the people involved to point out some remarks about it and to make predictions about the possible future trends of this practice. We should take account of the individual and collective experience, though limited in time, of lecturers and students to improve the learning and teaching process if the actual condition of pandemic turns to be not as temporarily as we thought.

3. Research Questions

Remote learning or e-learning or synchronous computer mediated communication human-computer-human, has already had applications in SLA (second language acquisition) as we saw in the

introduction. If we take into account the Krashen's input hypothesis (1985), which states that only comprehensible input, the stimuli we give to students, can contribute to the acquisition process and the Swain's theory of comprehensible output (Swain, 1985) which makes learners (and teachers) aware of the linguistic resources the learner can make use of, then we can state that learning process of a second (or foreign) language may be seen as a continuum of input and output. However, some scholars state that input and output are not enough for learners to develop their interlanguage and claim that interactions among learners or among learners and speakers is the key to foreign language acquisition (Long & Robinson, 1998). For this reason, computer mediated communication for language learning (Lamy & Hampel, 2007), henceforth CMCL, it is a strong instrument for learning, but its use should be carefully controlled. We would like to make a brief assessment of what advantages and disadvantages of the overall teaching and learning method mediated by portable devices (CMCL) were spotted by our students. Furthermore, we try to interpret how those features are applied or applicable for Russian as a foreign language (RFL). In addition, a brief prediction of how this model works (or does not work) will be provided in the end. Let us now analyze the main questions we asked to our focus group.

1. What are the advantages of this format of teaching RFL?
2. What disadvantages arise?
3. What are the perspectives for long-term application of distance learning in universities?

Let us now analyze the characteristics of the focus group and the answers we got from our research.

4. Purpose of the Study

The way remote learning affects teaching methods of Russian as a foreign language is still an understudied topic. In fact, on the most authoritative databases of research articles and conference proceedings no material is available on this issue³. Even though there are already articles focused on the issues of how language learning should be set into a remote way (Gacs et al., 2020), no studies reporting the experience of a Russian institutions which are actually indexed on the international databases and which are accessible for English- speaking audience are now available. Hence the need to report our experience, as researchers and practitioners, focused on the student's side but also taking account of the teaching involvement during the pandemic from March 2020.

5. Research Methods

At the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, we have a pool of students from all around the world, every year we have more than 9000 foreign students (non-Russian) who represent about 158 countries⁴. This internationally vibrant environment makes this institution ideal for qualitative research on Russian as a foreign language given the huge number of students studying this language along with their core subjects. For this research we focused on master's degree students of the first and second year of philology. This choice was not random, in fact this decision may be seen as strategic, given that they are

³ Last research dates 28-11-2020. <https://d-russia.ru/minobrnauki-otpravilo-studentov-na-distancionnoe-obuchenie-do-6-fevralja-2021-goda.html>

⁴ <http://www.rudn.ru/about>

the ones with the highest amount of RFL lessons in their curriculum. At the same time, many of them expressed the willingness to find a prospective job connected with Russian language. Consequently, their expected commitment to study this subject, along with the eagerness to get acquainted with the culture of Russian people should make them more suitable to infer the methodology of teaching languages in general, and in this case, remotely. Students' experience and their personal observations on the process of remote learning, along with changes in their lifestyle (Marstaller, 2020) turns to be important to make a critical analysis on the issue. Only teamwork where students and practitioners are free to express their opinion can help to make robust assessments and further improvement given the unpredictable, at the moment, end of the pandemic. Let us analyze the characteristics of students who contributed to this research from the data displayed in table 1.

Table 1. Breakdown of students

Nationality	N of students	Year of enrolment (1 or 2)
Chinese	16	1/2
Indian	3	1
Syrian	2	1
Vietnamese	1	2
Croatian	1	1
Italian	1	2
Sri Lankan	1	2
Mongolian	1	2
Total	25	

Students of this focus group are enrolled in the first and second year of master's degree in philology, which were chosen as a good sample model for the reasons explained above. From the data displayed in table 1, we can make some qualitative and quantitative inference on this group.

a) The students involved in the research are 26 (N= 26), which represent the whole group of foreign (non-Russian) students attending the course of RFL.

b) The very majority of respondents (64%) are from China. This is the only nationality represented in the first and second year of master's degree.

c) The extremely diversified combination of nationalities within both groups permits social and cultural exchanges where Russian is the lingua franca.

Another important information is that the majority of students, in particular 100% of Chinese students enrolled in the first year, could not (and still cannot) come to Russia, therefore we can consider them as *fully remote students* enrolled in a foreign (from their point of view) university. This feature makes them really interesting, since they applied in Russia knowing that, at least in the beginning, there will have been a certain period of remote teaching. For second year students the situation is more mixed, they got acquainted with offline teaching methodology of Russian but they experienced the transition to remote learning, many of them, sometimes advised by their embassies come back to their country and could not (and still cannot) come back to Russia.

Given the features of this focus group of students, we asked them three questions:

1. What are the advantages of this format of teaching RFL?

2. What disadvantages arise?

3. What are the perspectives for long-term application of distance learning in universities?

These questions were asked firstly as an open discussion during the lesson and then as a composition.

Apart from a focused oral and written exercise, the pros and cons of remote learning itself and remote learning of Russian as a foreign language were often discussed with related debates among the students. It was also a good topic to make students aware of their condition, and to share it in a foreign language with their classmates. Let us now look closer at the results we obtained.

6. Findings

We tried to find the peculiarities of remote learning, including those of teaching Russian as a foreign language with CMC. Students highlighted the negative and positive aspects of this educational methodology, and even though the former outweigh the latter, we will discuss the both of them.

Among the benefits expressed by students, safety seems to be the key finding. The benefit of distance education is to prevent the spread of coronavirus pandemic among students and teachers. This is a good way to keep those at risk from getting infected (people with chronic diseases, the elderly, etc.). The second advantage from students' side is the opportunity to receive education from anywhere in the world. This is important, because many foreign students left for their homeland during the pandemic and were unable to return to Russia due to the closure of borders between countries⁵. They also claim that now it is easier to prepare material for classes and their overall workload has decreased. Video recordings of lessons, the ability to use written direct communication with teachers reinforces important points and avoids the need to write down key points in a notebook on their own. From the teacher's point of view, these last so-called advantages, in fact, reduce attention and participation of students during classes.

In addition to the advantages, the number of disadvantages listed by students is striking. First of all dependence on electronic devices and on a stable internet connection. They note that most often the quality of classes depends on the quality of the connection. This factor can significantly compromise the interactivity of the lesson and affects the attentiveness of the student himself. A very important point for students is that education is not only learning, but a full set of knowledge, skills, experience and connections that are unlikely to be formed and trained while sitting at home (in their homeland), even with a tight schedule of classes. Students also argue that constant sitting at home has a bad effect on the psyche, because they get up and the daily plan includes several hours (Asanov et al., 2021), and has a bad effect on health, especially on sight. This learning system, in their opinion, is not suitable for languages, since the lack of a language environment and contact with native speakers reduces the effectiveness of language classes, therefore, their language skills deteriorate. Personal workload should increase in order to achieve those language skills that could be passively acquired living and studying in the university campus. University provides a working atmosphere for students and opportunities to communicate during breaks, something that home walls and chatting with classmates on the phone cannot or could not yet replace. As a consequence, a lot depends on the motivation of each student, which comes from the desire

⁵ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/17/as-russia-eases-its-border-restrictions-who-is-able-to-enter-a71853>

to learn the language for practical or utilitarian purposes (Gardner, 2006). As a rule, not everyone has this kind of motivation, since Russian language can just be considered as a tool for obtaining higher education, or the student does not include it among his priorities. In conclusion, the students stated that distance education is not the future of the humanities and much less the future of language learning.

6.1. A brief comment from the lecturer's viewpoint

On the lecturer's side there are some key issues in the new methodology of teaching Russian that need to be refined. First of all, there has been a relatively large, depending on age, investment in the acquisition of know-how for the provision of remote teaching. It was easy to anticipate that the older the lecturer, the more difficult it will be for him to master the technological means to implement a good remote teaching methodology. But, even for the young, it was difficult to rebuild a curriculum and the teaching methodology in order to set a completely new approach. It was difficult, and still is, to achieve control on students during classes and to compensate for the lack of emotional feedback from students. If in the classroom, looking at the reaction of students to a certain topic, the teacher can understand how to adjust his approach in order to catch their interest, in the absence of personal contact this is almost impossible. Students rarely turn on the camera, sometimes they have not even met the teacher offline and they do not feel confident to show themselves. Accordingly, communication is limited to a few extroverted people, despite the fact that the group may be large. In this regard, the difference between students increases, those who are more motivated, or more extroverted, or simply speak Russian better, dominate the conversation leaving no room for those who would not speak without a direct invitation from the teacher. The teacher-leader, having in mind the time at his disposal, should act as a moderator and try to give the floor to everyone, most often to the least willing. He should keep in mind that students may be strangers to each other, and that they do not use Russian as a lingua franca, in particular if they are first year students. In this case scaffolding and collaborative dialogues need to be adapted to the new reality. Hopefully, they keep contact after and during the lesson with chat groups, in particular the Chinese groups seem to be involved in this process, but they do that in their native language. Thus, it is necessary to artificially form conversation groups or arrange oral role-playing games, so that students can use a foreign language not only with the teacher, but also among themselves. This approach can be important to minimize differences among students. In fact, correlation between extraversion and fluency (Carluccio et al., 2019; Oya et al., 2004) may skew the lecturer's perception of the actual language skills of a student, above all in a "class" where the one who speaks is always in the spotlight. Active participation of the lecturer, to give the floor to "more silent" students, helps to minimize discrepancies in speaking acts, between those who are more eager to take the risk of talking (Ely, 1986) and the less self-confident.

7. Conclusion

The students replied that this is not the future of the humanities. Teachers disagree, some praise distance learning and foresee the further use of this learning format in all disciplines, some hope for a

quick return to the classroom, but note that it will be possible to use this experience for future applications.

It is too early to draw definitive conclusions. Whether this format of education will have a future depends primarily on the restoration of favorable conditions associated with the end of coronavirus pandemic. Only a posteriori we can reliably sum up the results of the social experiment carried out. At this point, it seems clear that outside the linguistic environment it is harder to learn languages. Studying at a foreign university loses its importance and attractiveness if people sit at home in their country. In addition to the student's personal motivation, the teacher must provide language support: he must take time to consult with each student and suggest informal ways of learning languages (Carluccio & Rubakova, 2019). Only through practice we will better understand what flaws exist in our personal teaching methods and how to overcome them. No improvement will be made if we think that the pandemic will end tomorrow. We should act as if remote teaching was the only possible way of teaching if we really want to make the difference and give an added value to our students. To improve our methodology, we need to listen to them, even if it is difficult, even if a lot of time and resources are required. The difference between taking up a language course online and studying language at the university depends on our future approach to remote teaching.

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