

DEVELOPING AN ONLINE LANGUAGE COURSE: SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER

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In the past, the main educational delivery model for universities was basically the traditional lecture. However, innovations in educational delivery methods have changed the way students study. Higher education institutions have increasingly embraced online education, and the number of students enrolled in distance programmes is rapidly rising in universities throughout Europe. Traditional teacher-directed instruction, when the teacher is in charge of the learning process, does not work outside the classroom. Distance learning, being an excellent alternative to a classroom-based education, is more flexible, since students can take classes from the convenience of their home or office, log in any time of the day and any day of the week. Besides, distance education may deliver teaching on an individual basis. Distance learning technologies present many new options for teaching foreign languages. The success of distance learning in developing students' foreign language skills depends on the ability of the teacher to design an interactive course, which will inspire the students to study with enthusiasm. Online language learning can provide opportunities, encouragement, and inducements for better forms of teaching than face-to-face because students learn better, when they are actively engaged with some tasks.

Keywords: distance learning, English language teaching, online English language course

1. Introduction

Some time ago, the major educational delivery model for higher education institutions (HEIs) was basically the traditional lecture. Nevertheless, innovations in educational delivery methods have changed the way students study.

Universities have increasingly embraced online education, and the number of students enrolled in distance programmes is quickly increasing in HEIs all over Europe. Traditional teacher-directed tuition, when the teacher is in charge of the learning process, does not work outside the classroom. Distance learning is an excellent alternative to a classroom-based education; it is more flexible, as students can take classes from the convenience of their home or office, log in any time of the day and any day of the week. Moreover, distance education may deliver teaching on an individual basis. Distance learning technologies present many new alternatives for teaching foreign languages as well. This is especially important in the context of intensification of language learning and teaching in the EU countries; the European Union language policies are intended on encouraging knowledge of languages to help citizens profit from the educational, professional and economic opportunities created by an integrated Europe [1], [2], [3].

The purpose of this paper is to identify and review the main problems related to developing an online language course.

2. Stimulating Students' Positive Perception of a Foreign Language

The success of distance learning in developing students' foreign language skills depends on the ability of the teacher to design an interactive course, which will inspire the students to study with enthusiasm. What educators have to do is to develop ways of providing the student with the ownership of the task, and that is what online teaching might give us where the teacher has to pull back and in many ways become a resource.

Online language learning can provide opportunities, encouragement, and inducements for better forms of teaching than face-to-face because students learn better, when they are actively engaged with some tasks. What else should be taken into consideration is the fact that learning has to take place in meaningful, relevant contexts. Everything should have a practical application, the teacher should provide his/her students with the tasks or activities, which will help language learners feel fully engaged. According to Edwards [4], a positive motivation is vital for successful language learning. Consequently, the development of a student's motivation is of fundamental importance for educators. So, we can presume that we as teachers face a challenging task to design a course which will motivate our students to study with enthusiasm. Our main task is to inspire language learning and to create the awareness of a language through its practical application. This, in turn, will facilitate the acquisition of new experience and new know-how, and will lead to personality enrichment in the context of life-long learning.

For stimulating students' positive perception of a foreign language and encouraging their integrative motivation, we can incorporate the aspects specified in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* [5] in the online language course: a) knowledge-of-the-world aspect; b) intercultural awareness aspect; c) socio-cultural aspect.

We should introduce the students with some knowledge about the country, in which a foreign language is spoken. In this fashion, we provide the basis for understanding the environment, in which a language is used and developed. It is also very important to help our graduates understand other cultures for communicating successfully in a multicultural environment. It is crucial for young people to possess some knowledge about the main characteristics of the society; social values, norms and rules influence the way people perceive other individuals and situations.

The knowledge our students acquire is categorized as the so-called “declarative knowledge”, which is directly related to language learning and which provides the context relevant to a foreign language [5]. We presume that incorporating the above mentioned aspects in language teaching may encourage students’ interest in other cultures or languages [6].

However, the declarative knowledge must be supported by a set of practical skills – the ability to study and to use the acquired knowledge in practice, i.e. educators need to supplement the declarative knowledge with the associated linguistic knowledge (Fig. 1).

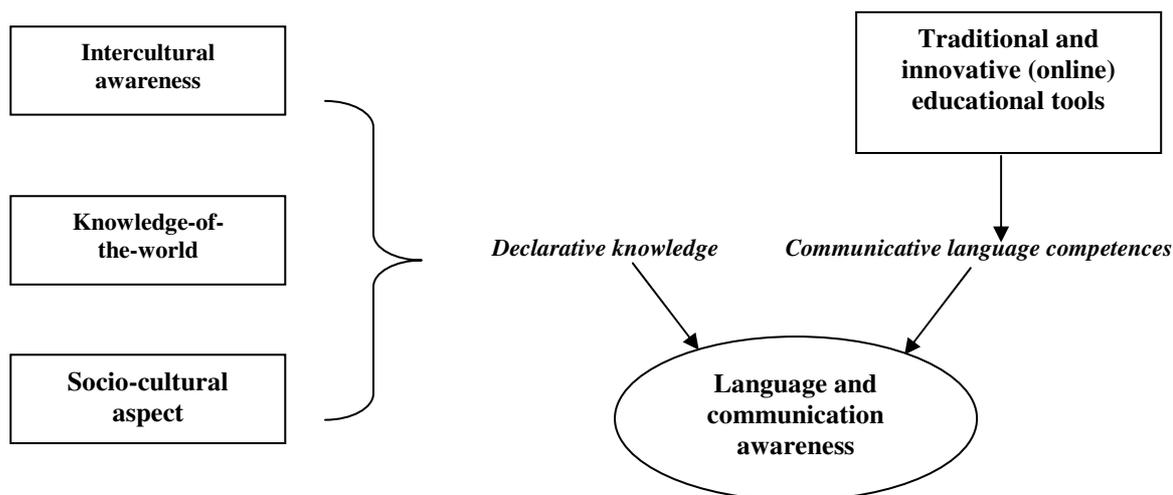


Figure1. Developing language and communication awareness in the process of language learning

These days, educators should adapt to the interdisciplinary character of the fields opened up by modern knowledge-based society. Languages are incorporated in the curriculum along with other subjects; it allows educators to strengthen contextual links between various topics and subjects, thus creating the educational environment more related to real life situations. This is particularly important for performing the assignments and activities needed to cope with the communicative situations, in which language learners are involved. On the other hand, participating in the simulated “real life situations” students can master as linguistic as non-linguistic skills. So, this is what educators should take into consideration when developing a distance-language course.

3. Developing an Online Language Course: the Basic Principles

The Chair of Linguistics of Transport and Telecommunication Institute has developed a new distance-learning course “English for students of Logistics” intended for increasing the students’ proficiency in professional business communication in the area of Business Logistics.

We assume that in designing an online English language course the following principles should be taken into consideration:

- Teachers should make the most of the existing paper-based and multimedia-based material and find the way to integrate it into the syllabus of the language course.
- Whatever we teach we have to remember that if the ones we teach find your approach exciting enough, they will achieve the best results. This is true in face-to-face learning, but in distance learning this approach reaches the highest importance.
- For encouraging students to keep on practicing the knowledge they acquire teachers must offer them various types of exercises, which not only check their understanding but enable them to enjoy the process.
- Teachers should take advantage of the available Internet resources; the resources must be customized to the syllabus of the course.
- A variety of video and audio options should be provided.

- Students' engagement in creating multimedia materials is supposed to be rather helpful in terms of using the constructivist approach to language learning.
- In this context, guidance and assistance from IT department of a higher education institution is very important.
- The system of assessment must include clear criteria for evaluation of students' work.
- The educational material must be reviewed and updated on a regular basis, the emphasis being put on stimulating students' positive perception of a foreign language.

Let us discuss these principles in detail. The time when teachers experienced the lack of interesting, motivating and resourceful books has been left behind. Nowadays there are a lot of course books available for educators to choose from. Online teachers, in this respect, have an advantage. They can combine many of them for creating an online course, which will satisfy both their demands and the demands of their students. Teachers develop a course knowing who will be their potential target audience. It is in their power to grab the students' attention to the task which, they think, might be more useful for them. For instance, we might concentrate on grammar more if we feel it is more likely to cause difficulties or on lexical material of the lesson if we are aware that it might hinder the students' comprehension of the topic under discussion.

One thing is to choose texts for reading, to make up lexical and grammar exercises and another thing is to involve students in completing these tasks. How to inspire learners to do the offered assignments if we are not even visible for them and can not monitor their performance? The answer is in the question itself. We do not need to accomplish all the tasks; these are the students themselves who will do that. They will monitor their performance, they will follow their own progress, and they will polish their vocabulary with the help of interactive exercises, which are the key element of all online courses.

Today, educators can make use of an assortment of software tools for developing an online language course. These tools enable teachers to create a variety of interactive tasks:

- multiple choice exercises;
- short-answer exercises;
- matching/ordering exercises;
- true/false exercises;
- gap-fill exercises, etc.

Such exercises are especially useful for learning and mastering different language skills. The learners can try doing the tasks as many times as it is necessary for their complete understanding of the material. Moreover, it may become very exciting, and this activity will not let them feel bored. Besides, through the interactive tasks “real life situations” can be simulated; the above mentioned aspects (knowledge-of-the-world aspect, intercultural awareness aspect, socio-cultural aspect) are integrated in the language course.

Another very important element, which is an integral part of online courses, is video and audio material. Its main purpose is to bring life into the course, make it more dynamic. Multimedia content is one of the most compelling materials in the online- education revolution. It provides students with a lot of challenging opportunities such as listening and watching study course materials at a pace and time that accommodates their own schedules and preferred modes of learning. The students are offered to watch authentic (“real life”) situations related to their professional area. What is more, multimedia materials will help teachers evaluate the students' pronunciation, intonation and fluency.

Although the main stress is made on the students' independent approach to the studies, the assessment is still necessary and the final evaluation is inevitable and important. However, we as teachers have to remember that a very distinctive and precise table of written and oral tasks' assessment should be given. Our students have to realise what is expected from them in order to achieve the best results, we believe that a detailed instruction is a must in any online course; otherwise instead of working productively, students will waste time getting in touch with their teachers for endless explanations of uncertain moments.

Online courses have one more advantage and this advantage is their flexibility. The course can be easily updated; new facts can be brought into the course as well as more up-to date video materials and new developments in the area of the students' interests.

Teachers have to do a lot of work continuously updating technical skills, working creatively with the virtual environment, investing their time and efforts; they have to remain committed to change and flexibility. Only then a truly original online pedagogy for language teaching can be developed.

4. Conclusions

Our main concern as educators is to conduct either conventional or distant lessons as efficiently and productively as possible. Our task is not to decide, which method of learning is better: face-to face or distant. We have to accept the latter as a reality, because its key role in delivering educational services in the near future is evident.

What educators ought to do is to provide creative (and innovative) techniques and tools in developing the learning environment that

- a) motivates students to study a foreign language;
- b) simulate “real life situations” and incorporate a non-linguistic aspect in learning a language;
- c) stimulate students’ communicative skills and creative thinking abilities.

The fast development of high technology paves the way for success of online courses and their clever implementation will lead to the construction of an interesting, challenging and motivating online course.

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Stukalina, J., Kazanovska, V. TIEŠSAISTES VALODAS KURSA IZSTRĀDĀŠANA: DAŽAS RISINĀMĀS PROBLĒMAS

Iepriekš augstskolās ir praktizēta tikai viena, tradicionālā, mācību metode – lekcija. Pašlaik jaunās vēsmas izglītības sfērā šo situāciju ir mainījušas. Tiešsaistes apmācībai augstākajā izglītībā tiek pievērsts arvien vairāk uzmanības, un daudzās Eiropas universitātēs vērojama tendence, ka uz tālmācības kursiem reģistrēto studentu skaits stabili pieaug. Tradicionālajā mācību modelī skolotājs nespēj kontrolēt mācību procesu ārpus klases telpām. Tālmācība kā lieliska alternatīva tradicionālajai pieejai ir daudz elastīgāka attiecībā uz studentiem: viņi var organizēt savas nodarbības laikā, kas viņiem ir ērts un pieņemams, lai kur arī viņi neatrastos: mājās, darbā, ceļā. Turklāt ar tālmācības palīdzību iespējams īstenot individuālu pieeju katram studentam. Tālmācība piedāvā virkni jaunu paņēmieni un iespēju svešvalodu apguvē. Tomēr tās panākumi ir atkarīgi no tā, vai pasniedzējs spēs izstrādāt interaktīvo kursu, kas studentus iedvesmos un ļaus tiem mācīties ar interesi un entuziasmu. Valodas apguve tiešsaistē paredz studentu aktīvu iesaistīšanos mācību procesā un sniedz viņiem iespēju pašiem šo procesu arī kontrolēt, kas var kalpot par lielisku stimulu un motivēt studentus mācīties.

Atslēgvārdi: tālmācība, angļu valodas pasniegšana, angļu valodas kurss tiešsaistē

Стукалина, Ю., Казановская, В. РАЗРАБОТКА ДИСТАНЦИОННЫХ ЯЗЫКОВЫХ КУРСОВ: НЕКОТОРЫЕ ВОПРОСЫ ДЛЯ ОБСУЖДЕНИЯ

Раньше единственной моделью обучения в университете была традиционная лекция. Но новые веяния в сфере образования изменили эту ситуацию. Высшее образование все больше и больше уделяет внимание онлайн обучению, и во многих европейских университетах количество студентов, записавшихся на дистанционные программы, неуклонно растет. В традиционной модели обучения учитель не может контролировать учебный процесс за пределами классной комнаты. Дистанционное обучение является прекрасной альтернативой традиционному; оно представляет собой более гибкую форму обучения для студентов: они могут заниматься в любое удобное для них время, где бы они не находились – дома, на работе, в дороге. Кроме того, с помощью дистанционного обучения можно легче осуществлять индивидуальный подход к студентам. Дистанционное обучение предлагает много новых способов обучения иностранному языку. Но его успех зависит от того, сможет ли преподаватель грамотно разработать интерактивный курс, который будет мотивировать студентов и позволит им заниматься с интересом и энтузиазмом. Изучение языка онлайн предполагает активное участие студентов в учебном процессе и предоставляет им возможность самим осуществлять контроль над ним, что может быть очень хорошим стимулом, который мотивирует студентов на учебу.

Ключевые слова: дистанционное обучение, преподавание английского языка, дистанционный курс английского языка