E-learning solutions for teaching foreign language to correspondence students

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Abstract. The paper examines the problems faced by lecturers of the Department of Russian and Foreign Languages (Russian State Agrarian University – Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy) when switching to distance learning due to the coronavirus pandemic. The authors dwell on specific features of the distance presentation of new material, as well as the control of learning outcomes. The experimental part presents the survey results of students’ opinion on the frequency of using certain types of learning activities and the approval rating of learning activities from students’ point of view. The authors also share their successful experience of teaching "Business Foreign Language" in a distance format for correspondence students. In conclusion, they summarize ideas on further ways to improve the effectiveness of distance courses of a foreign language for specific purposes.

1. Introduction
Specific goals of modernizing the present education system include developing the international competitiveness of educational institutions and their graduates, improving the quality of education, as well as professional and academic mobility, solving the problems of a modern knowledge-based economy and production. All this can be achieved by intensifying the study process using innovative teaching and learning techniques that meet modern educational needs. With the advancement in communication and network technologies, the teaching environment has extended and learning solutions have emerged to provide meaningful learning experiences in academic settings [1].

Today, information and communication technologies (ICT) have become an integral part of the teaching and learning system of Foreign Language for Specific Purposes. Numerous higher educational institutions are actively implementing training programs using modern technologies, in particular, distance learning, and appropriate training tools [2] to increase their competitiveness.

Distance learning methods are understood as “educational technologies implemented mainly with the use of information and telecommunication networks with indirect (remote) interaction between students and lecturers” [2]. Distance learning will not work unless the university has established an efficient electronic learning environment including computer-supported collaborative learning, electronic learning resources and learning administration system [3].

As to the study of foreign languages, this is especially true for correspondence and part-time students. The age of learners and the resulting degree of autonomy, responsibility and discipline are key factors affecting teaching methods and types of learners’ interactions, since learners of different ages have different needs, competencies and cognitive skills. In particular, adult learners are characterized by
certain life and learning experience; they show higher expectations about the study process and learning outcomes, use their own learning strategies, demonstrate a more critical attitude to teaching methods, and the ability to learn at their own pace [4]. So educational practices should be re-defined, which will enable students to access and manage their own learning, with the guidance and pedagogical support of the teachers [5]. Students should get “a fairly complete and adequate understanding of the structure and specificity of their future professional activity and demonstrate profound interest in it, as well as the highly developed professional thinking. This is impossible without the correspondence of the teaching content with the requirements made for practitioners” [6].

2. Research methods
The research purpose is to determine feasible and efficient learning activities that are most appropriate for teaching foreign language to correspondence students in an electronic learning management system (ELMS).

Research methods include analyzing scientific and pedagogical literature on education digitalization and syllabus design, analyzing pedagogical experience, questionnaire surveying, and expert assessment. The research is based on methodological provisions of personality-oriented and competence-based approaches.

The research was carried out in Russian State Agrarian University - Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy by the academic staff of the Department of Russian and Foreign Languages. It involved 50 correspondence and part-time students.

3. Problem relevance
It should be noted that the existing training system is characterized by a number of significant shortcomings, namely:

- study portals typically contain control assignments (texts, tests, exercises) only, and students can download them, perform independently and then send for verification to their tutors by e-mail or via the portal. Besides, various main and supplementary study materials can also be posted there;
- the tests performed by students do not fully reflect all the requirements for the competencies to be formed; in fact, they involve working with artificially elaborated sentences with grammatical structures rarely encountered in practice, as well as the translation of adapted study texts;
- it is almost impossible to identify those who actually performed the test; experience shows that most students do not do their work independently;
- the number of practical classes is insignificant (10-16 contact hours), the time available does not allow to cover a sufficient amount of material and use any active and interactive training techniques;
- due to the above reasons, the intermediate assessment of learning outcomes is also reduced to reading and translating a text with a dictionary, which does not provide for full assessment of students’ readiness to perform professional activities using a foreign language.

Thus, we can assume that the existing training system does not provide opportunities to achieve the learning outcomes stated in the curriculum.

The present paper analyzes the experience of switching to distance learning gained by Russian State Agrarian University – Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy at the Department of Russian and Foreign Languages.

When switching to distance learning, lecturers were given the following instructions:

- create separate folders for each course in the personal accounts of the electronic information and educational environment (step-by-step recommendations were given for students and
lecturers); a course syllabus with topics for upcoming lectures and practical classes was mandatory to be uploaded;

- each folder created for a particular subject should contain teaching materials structured according to the topics of classes provided by the course syllabus for the current semester. To prevent students from overloading with a large amount of material, lecturers were recommended to place only what is necessary for the qualitative development of the current topic (those wishing to study the topic in-depth could resort to additional sources using a list of references or links);
- make assignments for students to study each new topic only on the day of the scheduled class and demand the assignment be completed by the next class;
- while developing tasks (questions, tests, exercises, etc.) strictly adhere to the topic studied and ensure an acceptable level of complexity;
- when conducting lectures or practical classes in a videoconference or webinar format, strictly adhere to the current schedule of classes, and notify students in advance;
- provide the dean's office / institute directorate with information about the activity of students only on the scheduled day of the class.

Lecturers were also encouraged to practice Zoom, Skype, or Teams at their own discretion.

The experience of using the University portal in the first weeks of self-isolation showed the main disadvantages of the proposed organizational, technical and methodological solutions:

- despite the fact that the university has its own (but so far inactive) ELMS based on Moodle (elms.timacad.ru), it was fairly decided that no one would have time to form courses there virtually from scratch, so the lecturers were offered to work with folders located on the study portal. They soon considered it extremely inconvenient, since files had to be uploaded to shared folders, and not all students named their files correctly, or duplicated files, etc. There were cases when the folders of individual groups with all their contents were accidentally deleted by someone.
- assignments were ordered to be given strictly during the scheduled classes, and feedback was expected to be exactly at the same time. Thus the basic principle of distance learning - learn when it suits you - began to be interpreted in a completely different way. Moreover, students also had to additionally register on the scheduled day and time of the class in a special group on the portal (despite the fact that almost all of them left for different regions to their home places, some of the regions being located in a different time zone).

However, some positive aspects should be mentioned here as well. The portal chat allowed lecturers to discuss a number of organizational issues and send a checked file with submitted tasks to students (otherwise, when uploading to a shared folder, it will soon become unclear who, when and what posted there anything).

In the process of finalizing the portal functionality, lecturers got an opportunity to create group projects to engage only specific students of their study groups (subgroups). These groups have their own live feed, their own group chat, their own disk and other options, available to group members only. The lecturer, by default, becomes the administrator of the group, choosing an assistant from the group at his/her own discretion, therefore, students no longer are allowed to delete such a project group or their group members’ materials posted in it.

As an option for distance learning, lecturers were also asked to test a commercial digital "interactive" platform from third-party developers, containing a foreign language course with sections "vocabulary-grammar-reading-listening". The system contains ready-made tasks that it can automatically check. The functionality of the system allows lecturers to combine content for homework, track the results of each student in each section, and create individual learning paths based on the progress of each student. But the course content cannot be limited to the offered range of activities. Anyway, it seems valuable to
study the full functionality of such educational systems, but without speaking, creative writing and making projects - presentations (videos) effective teaching will not work in full. The system does not provide for the communication between the lecturer and students, the interaction of students with each other. Instead, it automatically checks the standard tests performed by the students (multiple choice, matching, filling in the blanks), and the lecturer receives analytics and can vary the tasks for different students. At the same time, the existing curriculum documentation provides for various interactive technologies of foreign language training, which involve not only oral interaction of participants as such, but also various forms of teamwork, involving the separation of roles. Of course, it is necessary to add exercises for the development and control of oral speech (monologues, dialogues, polylogue discussions), project activities and creative writing (essays, promotional materials, etc.).

4. Results and discussion

As part of our study, in the spring of 2020 we asked correspondence students to rank the following learning activities in terms of their effectiveness. Each activity should be rated on a scale from 1 to 5, using each number only once.

Table 1. Questionnaire for students.

| #  | Learning activity                                                                 | Effectiveness evaluation (1…5) | Frequency of using (more frequently, less frequently, not used) |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Independent study of the material with subsequent submission of completed assignments for checking into a folder on the portal |                                |                                                               |
| 2  | Group online work (reading and translating texts, doing exercises, making conversations and conducting surveys) |                                |                                                               |
| 3  | Individual and mini-group conversations in the chat or during a video call (checking independent work and home tasks, making situational dialogues, discussing current topics, and holding debates) |                                |                                                               |
| 4  | Implementation of project tasks with subsequent presentation in the chat (practical case-studying and solving problematic tasks: compilation of various documents (letters, resumes, mind maps and diagrams) |                                |                                                               |
| 5  | Implementation of individual and group project assignments with online presentation |                                |                                                               |

Analysis of the data obtained showed the following picture:

![Figure 1. Approval rating of learning activities among students: positions 1-5 correspond with learning activities 1-5 presented in table 1.](image-url)
Students were also asked to evaluate the frequency of using these activities (based on the results of the spring semester).

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** Actual frequency of using the considered types of learning activities: positions 1-5 correspond with learning activities 1-5 presented in table 1.

The learning process on the portal turned out to be especially effective during the period of module-based classes in a foreign language for groups of distance and part-time education faculties.

Here the issue of learning design came to the fore. A learning design is defined in methodological literature as “a sequence of teaching and learning activities, a plan for potential activities with learners, which is to be distinguished from a particular implementation of this plan with a particular group of learners” [7]. For university educators, “designing effective learning experiences requires them to draw together their specialist domain expertise with appropriate teaching strategies, while integrating the range of digital technologies that are now commonplace in higher education. This represents a significant challenge for even the most experienced university educators. Learning design has emerged as a particular branch of educational research and development that seeks to understand and support the design processes inherent in teaching” [8]. Since the training sessions of the groups were scheduled rather compactly, the responsible lecturers managed to competently design the course content, so in the process of study the students were able to independently solve the offered communicative tasks and present the results of their own project activities as materials for intermediate assessment.

**Table 2.** Fragment of the course syllabus for the "Business Foreign Language" course (training field 23.03.03 Operation of transport and technological machines and complexes).

| Sections and topics | Contact hours | Learning activities |
|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Section 1. Profile of a modern agricultural engineer and employment issues | 4 | - independent study of the course materials |
| Topic 1.1 Basic characteristics and requirements for the profession of an agricultural engineer in modern conditions, problems and prospects for professional growth | 2 | - drawing up your own CV (according to the proposed template) |
| Topic 1.2 Getting ready for employment - drawing up a business card and a CV, filling out questionnaires and forms, writing a motivation letter and preparing for a job interview | 2 | - preparing a motivation (cover) letter (according to a job advertisement in a foreign language found on the Internet) |
| Section 2. Structure and types of business letters | 6 | - taking an online “job interview” (with two lecturers) |
| Topic 2.1 General structure and requirements for composing a business letter | 2 | - independent study of the section materials |
| | | - implementation of an individual project assignment (analyzing a certain type of |
Students of the Faculty of Distance Learning who successfully completed this course noted the high intensity of the material presentation and study, as well as the great practical value of the proposed tasks. At the same time, many course participants marked the advantage of a convenient "flexible" time for preparing tasks, as well as the optimal format for their presentation.

5. Conclusion

Summarizing all the above, the following useful conclusions and suggestions can be drawn for further improving the functionality of the distance ELMS:

- Implementation of operational feedback through the "chat" tool in an asynchronous mode, allows instructing students "hot on the trail" and sending them attached files to correct errors;
- Optimization of work with text files with assignments made – students make assignments in black (by default) – lecturers highlight errors in yellow, make comments in red, and students add the corrected version in green without deleting the lecturer’s "colors";
- Optimization of weekly planning of learning activities based on the existing course syllabi, and elaboration of methodological recommendations for students on working with study resources in distance learning conditions.

In the future, the development of synchronous forms of interaction in the form of webinars seems to be rather a promising solution. Since the main emphasis in the use of ICT is gradually shifted to students, who are forced to choose a certain learning trajectory in the information-and-educational environment, the roles of the tutor and facilitator become especially important for the lecturer. At the same time, the main tasks are to help students plan their actions, facilitate finding solutions to problems and contribute to the successful achievement of learning outcomes. The lecturer is required to provide intensive feedback to all participants of the study process. Modern ICT make this interaction much more active and interactive, which is a good means of motivation.

Thus, the development of distance learning determines changes in the lecturer's role repertoire and the main responsibilities in the study process, which contributes to his/her professional growth, as well as the competitiveness of the educational organization. Nevertheless, with a fairly large potential of distance learning courses of a foreign language, there is still a number of problems that have to be solved by analyzing, among other things, foreign experience gained in designing such courses.

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