


Instructional Design of Skill-Balanced LMOOC: a Case of the Russian Language MOOC for Beginners

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Abstract: The period of MOOCs mass production made it possible to quite accurately observe the possibilities and limitations of this type of educational products. Language massive open online courses (LMOOCs) deserve a special discussion. Basic standard features of such courses pose big challenges in language learning since it is not only and not so much about the transfer of knowledge, but about developing communicative skills. In this regard, the LMOOC aimed at mastering general language should assume balanced proportions of work on all four language skills, both receptive and productive. In the article, we analyze a case of design and implementation of a skill-balanced course of Russian as a foreign language for the A0-A1 levels. Course objectives were described, as well as characteristic features of its target audience and methodological guidelines that determined the course design. The course scenario, peculiarities of course design and pedagogy were demonstrated, as well as the relevance between language competencies development and types of activities, communication methods and toolset.

Keywords: language massive open online course, MOOC, CALL, digital language learning, Russian language

Categories: L.3.5

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1 Introduction

In 2014 M. Sokolik noted that “if MOOCs are in their infancy, language MOOCs are positively neonatal” [Sokolik 2014, p. 16]. In 2017 Motzo and Proudfoot defined language MOOCs as an emerging category [Motzo, Proudfoot 2017, p.88]. At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, there are significant changes in the field of MOOCs in English, which is represented in the vast majority of courses [Perifanou 2016, p. 389] but it cannot be said that the situation has radically changed with respect to the other world languages. As shown in a recent review, the preferred languages of LMOOCs are English as a foreign language, Spanish and Italian [Sallam, Martín-Monje, Li 2020, p. 14].

The Russian language is still poorly represented on international and national Russian MOOC platforms, although a positive trend is emerging. At the time of writing this article in 2018, the course described in it was one of the five LMOOCs in Russian; but by the time of its publication, the list of courses had expanded. In 2020, LMOOCs for Russian language learners were conducted by Saint Petersburg State University (courses for B1-B2 levels on Coursera platform and National Open Education Platform); National Research University Higher School of Economics (express-courses for A1-A2 levels on Russian national platforms Universarium and Education in Russian), National Research Tomsk State University (courses based on cultural and

regional information on Coursera and several national platforms), range of courses by educational organizations and individual authors on national Stepic platform.

Most of the Russian language courses still share similarities and reproduce the earlier Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) pedagogy, which was based on behaviourist principles: they offer “primarily activities in which the learner consume[s] language, but [does] not produce it, typically: grammar drills, listening activities, or reading comprehension tasks” [Sokolik 2014, p. 19]. Certainly, the latest EdTech achievements help to package drilling exercises in an attractive multimedia format and gamify them, but the general picture remains the same: most of the LMOOCs we analysed for this study are constructed as multimedia phrasebooks containing several tasks aimed at memorisation of useful phrases, or as grammar-and-vocabulary-based courses, the best of which also encompass receptive skills.

In the literature on the LMOOC concept and the cases of this type of course design, a special place is occupied by a discussion of the challenges posed by the limitations of the MOOC format: LMOOCs are built around skills, not content, and this poses a special instructional problem (see [Godwin-Jones 2014]; [Motzo, Proudfoot 2017]; [Yuan 2015]). On the one hand, some researchers argue that the effectiveness of the LMOOCs is higher for the development of receptive skills, i.e., reading and listening [Vorobyeva 2018]. On the other hand, attempts are being made to create LMOOCs specifically aimed at developing productive skills [Köse et al. 2020]; research also confirms a positive link between learning through LMOOCs and speaking skills [Li 2017].

T. Read and E. Barcena proposed a detailed framework for an LMOOC based on a set of eight key concepts: language proficiency levels, communicative language competence, competence descriptors, language activities, communicative language processes, the external context of language use (domains/spheres of reality and situations), texts [Read, Barcena 2020]. In our research we will focus in detail on the concept of communicative language processes, which have which in the literature have traditionally been reduced to four basic language skills: reading and listening (receptive) and writing and speaking (productive).

2 Russian LMOOCs for beginners

The paper aims to describe the case of developing a skill-balanced Russian language course. Below we detail the factors that determined the course design and analyze the types of activities, communication modes and technological tools that were used to develop initial language skills within LMOOC.

2.1 Course objectives

Pushkin State Russian Language Institute under an agreement with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation was carrying out work on the MOOC in Russian as a foreign language. The courses line covering all levels according to the CEFR system, from A1 to C2, was placed on the Education in Russian platform (www.pushkininstitute.ru) and over 3 years gathered more than 29 thousand subscribers. The target project audience was supposed to include a fairly wide range of people who would prefer to learn Russian remotely, i.e. completely autonomously

or using tutor support, as well as teachers of Russian as a foreign language, who could use the course materials in their work, and organizations teaching Russian that could use the course as a basis in implementing the blended learning. Below, the results of a more detailed audience study, which was conducted after the course launch, would be described.

Developers faced a rather difficult task to create such courses that would provide a diligent user with an opportunity to master the entire system of Russian language at a certain level including the entire language aspects: phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and all language skills, both receptive and productive, i.e. reading, listening, writing and speaking; and at the C2 level – translation and interpreting skills. It's obvious that developers did not harbour any illusions in regard to a fully autonomous MOOC learning able to solve the issued challenge. That is why, from the very beginning, it was also envisaged to introduce synchronous online lessons with a tutor as an additional service.

It is clear that the most difficult course that would meet the stated requirements was the Russian language course for beginners. Upon successful completion of this course, users had to learn the following:

- read and write the Russian alphabet letters;
- read and understand small texts: announcements, restaurant menus, personal letters and messages, simple notes;
- understand familiar words and simple phrases of everyday communication in speech;
- fill in forms and write simple messages;
- take part in a dialogue on everyday topics;
- represent oneself and others; respond to invitations, questions, requests and suggestions; ask for help in Russian.
- tell stories about oneself, one's family and friends.

As could be seen, the goals are formulated in accordance with the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, i.e. focusing on teaching students to apply mastered language patterns to solve communicative tasks in any authentic situations. It would be logical to assume that this approach is more consistent with the cMOOC idea characterized by its "emphasis on interaction and community building" [Sokolik 2014]. However, in order the students could learn how to perform the described communicative tasks, the course should provide them with a required set of lexical and grammatical units, as well as basic knowledge of Russian phonetics and graphics. This is especially important in the initial stages of language learning when students do not yet possess sufficient linguistic knowledge. For these tasks, the xMOOCs concept is more suitable, which stands for content-based courses with a behaviourist pedagogical approach and an emphasis on individual learning. At the same time, it is important for developers not to allow the grammar-translation method to prevail and not to design a course as a system of drilling exercises aimed at learning vocabulary and grammar. On the other hand, it is worthwhile avoiding the course in the form of a phrasebook in audio or video format, since such material presentation is as far from the communicative MOOC idea, as the interactive workbook.

Thus, the task of the LMOOC developers is to find a balance between different forms of presenting language material and use the cMOOCs and xMOOCs benefits suitable for language learning and creating conditions for communicative practices in the online space.

2.2 Target audience

The most important step in developing an online course is to analyze the target audience and to consider its needs. In our case, such an analysis influenced the course architecture and was carried out twice: at the stage of creating the concept, we interviewed full-time students studying at the institute and foreign partners; and after launching the course pilot version we surveyed the first subscribers. The purpose of the study was to find out, what the purposes of online students were to learn Russian, how they were planning to use the course, what expectations they were having at the beginning of their studies.

A survey of the course first subscribers showed that the course content was put to good use by both students and teachers of the Russian language [see Fig. 1]. We should note that a separate category of users is represented by the institute partner organizations, which use the MOOC materials as a digital component of blended Russian language teaching. It is interesting to see that the majority of respondents who signed up for the course primarily to study Russian were learning the language in some organizations (university, school or courses) or were learning the language with a private teacher. This suggests that MOOC is used by such a group of students as an additional source of knowledge or an additional opportunity to improve their skills.

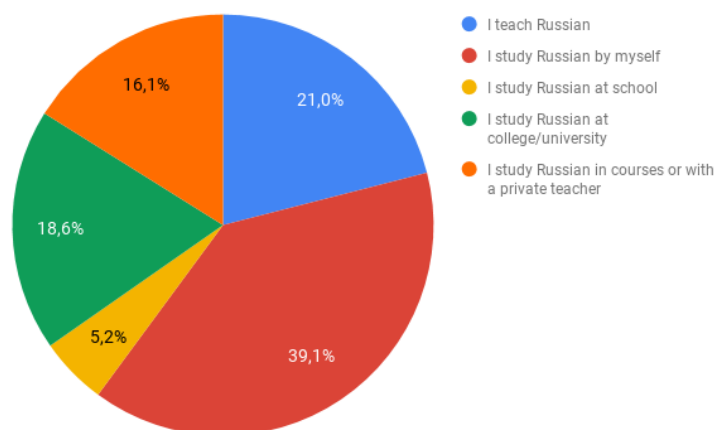


Figure 1: The diversity of target audience groups

Figure 2 shows, what motives for learning the Russian language the course audience was guided by (with the exception of the teachers' group). The survey revealed that the main audience for the course was individuals studying Russian 'for themselves', to learn more about world culture, including Russian culture, and become a more educated person. In second place were those who needed Russian for work and in third place were several segments of the target audience: students who hoped to obtain Russian citizenship or a residence or a work permit, most of whom were citizens of former Soviet Union countries; subscribers consisted of those who needed Russian language skills for educational purposes, usually in order to gain admission to Russian universities; and students who wanted to be able to understand news communicated in Russian. A small proportion of subscribers wanted to be able to communicate in

Russian with friends or relatives and, last but not least, the A1 course was enriched with the heritage speakers of Russian. The smallest group of subscribers consisted of students motivated by the desire to read Russian literature in the original.

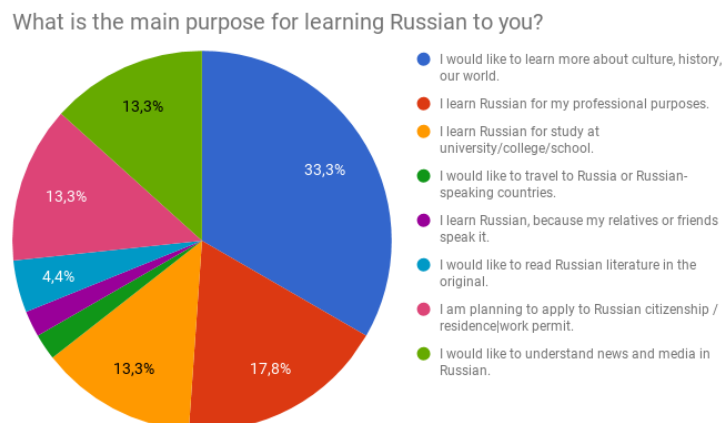


Figure 2: The main purposes of the subscribers to learn Russian

Our survey also made it possible to find out what educational goals were set primarily by the course audience. We proposed to evaluate on a scale from 1 to 9 the expected learning results according to the degree of their importance for a student. The most popular answer was, “I want to restore or maintain knowledge of the Russian language”; and it shows that a significant number of students already studied Russian and was planning to return to it using the course. As for the answers that imply differentiation of language competencies and language sections, students' expectations were distributed as follows: quite predictably, most of the respondents hoped to learn to understand written texts and spoken speech. Almost equally, students expected to develop productive written and verbal skills. It should be noted that the majority of respondents answering this question demonstrated priority in developing communicative competencies; and, paradoxically, the gap between the significance of each of the skills was minimal. Besides, a significant number of respondents expected to learn reading and writing in Cyrillic using the course. Less than a quarter of students would prefer to focus on Russian grammar; while lexical and phonetic aspects were found to be the least important for respondents.

Thus, analysis of the target audience showed that when planning the course architecture it is important to consider the following several aspects:

- the course is in demand not only by language learners but also by those who teach it,
- the course could be passed by those who already studied the language, or learn it in parallel with course participation,
- objectives of learning the language are very different depending on the potential audience, it is equally important for students to develop all the communication competencies.

2.3 Course structure

Below we will focus on the LMOOC design case for those who are just starting to learn Russian as a foreign language. As was noted above, this is the level that is the most difficult to create and master in an entirely online mode, as students require more assistance and support at this stage.

A1 course on the Education in Russian platform (pushkininstitute.ru) consists of 4 parts: basic module, introductory phonetic module, vocabulary and grammatical skills practising module and live oral speech auditing module. The general Russian language basic module is the foundation of the entire course. Passing this course is sufficient to achieve the A1 competence level; and the remaining modules are optional, as they allow expanding the main module content and enhancing separate skills. Below we will consider each of the modules in more detail.

The basic module curriculum has been developed using the backward design framework [Wiggins, McTighe 2005], in which the desired course outcomes were developed first, then the assessment system was planned, and in the next stage the course content itself was planned. As a result, the module consists of 16 units; passing through each of them takes 1-2 weeks with 2-4 hours daily practice. The first introductory unit introduces the Russian alphabet, the basics of Russian phonetics and rules of reading, as well as simple communicative formulas. Starting from the second unit, the structure of all lessons is becoming symmetrical. Each of them is devoted to a single communicative topic, which development envisages 1-2 grammatical and 1-2 lexical topics study. Communicative topics comply with the CEFR requirements and are quite traditional for this level: self-presentation, acquaintance, congratulation, orientation in a city, talking about hobbies, family, common day, communication in a hotel, restaurant, shop, visiting a doctor, etc. Interaction between topics and vocabulary and grammatical material is based upon the communicative principle: for example, in the module on communicating in a restaurant, students are required to study the instrumental case to name a dish: *блины с икрой* (pancakes with caviar), *салат с мясом* (salad with meat), *вода с газом* (fizzy water), etc.

In accordance with the communicative approach to learning a language, the principle of oral advancement is used during each lesson. This principle lies in the fact that new language units and communicative formulas are first presented in live oral speech and only afterwards are memorized and applied in a context, both written and oral. Simply speaking, traditional methodology believes that a student should first hear and understand, then see in writing and only after that master and apply. Oral advancement in a classroom is provided by the teacher, as a rule, in the introductory speech of a lesson; with autonomous online learning; video or audio files could play such a role. However, lack of reliance on written text in the online environment seems to create rather uncomfortable conditions for distance learning. Therefore, the oral advancement principle in the course is observed using the voiced instant messages at the beginning of each lesson, which fully corresponds to peculiarities of the digital communication environment, where the online students are staying. There are two corresponding participants: a young man studying Russian and his Russian acquaintance. So, the characters meet in absentia during the first lesson, make contact; at the next lessons they send photos from a trip, discuss plans for the evening and select souvenirs from Russia. All the dialogues look like real correspondence in the messenger, which gives them the characteristic of being native to the digital

environment [see Fig.3-4]. Replicas appear on the screen and are voiced by the announcer; thus, the text could be both seen and heard. The text is not accompanied by comments and explanations; but a student does not remain without semantization at all, as exchanges in emoji and pictures between the characters contribute to the understanding of dialogues; and, besides, dialogues hidden translation could be visualized.

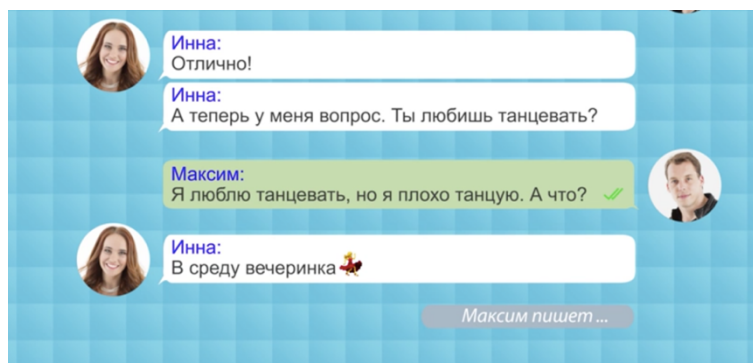


Figure 3: Voiced instant messages as an introduction to every lesson

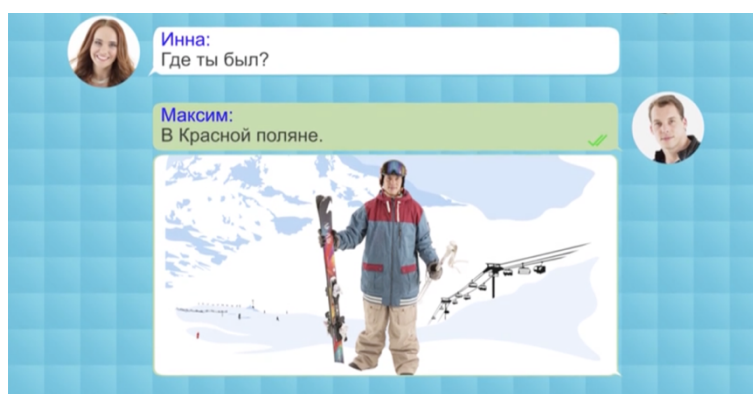


Figure 4: Visuals in instant messaging help to comprehend dialogues

The introductory part determines the lesson topic, for example, Acquaintance, Work and Leisure, House, Health, etc., and creates an “intrigue” by introducing new words and constructions. The vocabulary and grammar blocks following introduction expand the new vocabulary repertoire and explain the new grammatical topics. Their structure is quite traditional. At step 1, students are invited to observe a new language phenomenon or lexical unit in context. Step 2 is devoted to clarifying the meaning (semantization). At step 3, student becomes familiarized with the lexical and semantic group (for example, names of body parts or verbs of motion studied at the appropriate level) or with a grammar rule. The following steps involve working with a meaning (for example, word and picture matching or word and meaning matching), working with a form (spelling puzzles or spelling dictations) and using words in a context (sentence completion). It is important that the course should use both oral and written methods

for presenting new language units. Especially at the initial stage, it is important to teach students to link the word sounding with its graphic form.

After the lexical and grammatical units, those units follow that are focused on specific forms of speech activity in the following sequence: reading, listening, writing and speaking. It would be superfluous to say that all the units are lined up around the key theme of a unit and show how the new vocabulary and grammar are functioning in different genres and communicative situations. Working with receptive types of speech activity is fairly easy to pack into an online format. Within the course, pre-reading/pre-listening tasks, direct reading or listening aimed at a specific type of work with information, whether it is text perception as a whole or reading/listening for details, are traditionally included. However, teaching productive skills in a fully online format requires a certain piece of imagination from the LMOOC developer; so, we will dwell on these issues in more detail. We sought to the uniformity and proportionality of writing and speaking parts, although it is more traditionally to focus more on written tasks (as Read notes, “historically, more resources and tools have been available for written skill development since it is much easier to read and write online, and share the textual results with other people, than it is for the oral counterparts” [Read 2014]).

Evidently, it is difficult to organize students’ free written or oral communication at the learning stage of study in the online format, since their language repertoire is still very limited, and their communication skills require substantial assistance and control provided by a teacher. A1 level written and oral speech production requires substantial preparatory work, studying communicative formulas and samples of a particular genre. Therefore, the writing and speaking units are designed in such a way as to help the student go along the path of creating an independent statement. These blocks include three types of tasks: tasks with automatic verification, tasks that require verification using a sample and tasks involving a tutorial check. The target of preparatory tasks with automatic verification is to familiarize students with a specific genre or samples of dialogue or monologue speech on a specific topic. Examples of such exercises include text collection from fragments, text completion using words from the list, arranging dialogue remarks in correct order, relating speaker and his statement, etc. At the next stage in the speaking unit, student is proposed to independently but relying on a sample from previous tasks, make a remark in response to the dialogue initiating statement, for example, to answer such questions, as what his name was, what he was doing that day or how he felt. In the writing unit, student is asked to write a small piece of text again based on a genre sample or template, for example, to write a list of products to buy, a greeting card or a message proposing a meeting. Such tasks automatic control would require serious efforts on the part of the natural language proceeding engineers; and as long as there are no such possibilities, student is asked to verify his answer with a sample or template. Finally, the truly communicative part of each lesson is realized in communication with a tutor in an online session or when checking a written task.

In addition to the main module, students are proposed to take special courses for deeper study of certain aspects and skills. Introductory phonetics unit is focused on peculiarities in the Russian pronunciation, articulation, Russian intonation, graphics training and reading rules. Lexical and grammatical module is kind of interactive set of exercises that helps to consolidate new words and rules originating from the main module. Conversations with Russians module is designed to improve listening skills. Despite the fact that there is a sufficiently large number of materials for listening in the main module, these materials are all educational recorded by a teacher of the Russian

language in studio. Conversations with Russians module is intended to train the skill of perceiving live oral speech based on materials from films, TV series, commercials and video blogs. Each module lesson is built around a fragment of authentic video, which is preceded by preparatory tasks and is followed by tasks for understanding. All special modules, as well as the grammar reference book are connected with the main module through a system of hyperlinks.

2.4 Pedagogy

As mentioned above, the developers' task was to ensure that LMOOC really provided an opportunity not only to learn Russian, but also to learn communicating in Russian. Autonomous remote language learning could only create a foundation; but learning to communicate is only possible in the process of communication. That is why a decision was made in principle to launch the course in two formats: an autonomous, self-paced and tutor-supported format. In addition, institute partners are proposed to implement the blended learning methodology based on the course.

In the autonomous study format communication within the course is limited to communication between student and content and communication amongst the open class community in general forums, which were used mainly for solving organisational and technical issues and asking for help with tasks. Because the communicative skills of students at this level are limited, we did not consider it worthwhile to organise collaborative projects or peer-reviewed tasks. The main forms of communication for the open class community were course-specific forums and social networks.

In supported format the course is enriched by the opportunities for student-teacher communication. At the stage of approval of the course the second format was free and prospective teachers of Russian as a foreign language were recruited as tutors. In the future it is envisaged that students will pay a fee for access to the supported format.

It should be noted that freedom of timing and pace is one of the basic advantages of distance learning in general. Students can enrol on the course at any time and those using the autonomous study format can choose how to organise their study time. In the supported format study follows a schedule, as the most communication practice occurs during contact sessions with the teacher.

In addition, students chose from two trajectories: sequential, which involves progressing through the course step by step, receiving scores for completed tasks, or personalised, which involves choosing the order in which components of the course are completed or opting to complete only certain components. The existence of the personalised trajectory means the course is flexible and can be combined with other courses or resources.

From the very beginning, as soon as the course was placed on the platform, the model of admission to the course "on request" was chosen; a student could send a request at any time and get access to the materials. This decision was based on the assumption (which was later confirmed) that the course would be used not only as a self-sufficient educational product, but also as an additional resource in combination with other forms of learning.

As a technique for engaging in the course, the standard capabilities of the learning management system were used: notifications about the timing of assignments, marks for assignments and new events in the course, such as a planned online lesson. In addition, subscribers to the course receive regular emails containing material about a

specific topic and language material. These emails contain references to course materials to encourage students to look at the course materials and study the relevant topic in more detail.

2.5 Tasks and assessment

All tasks in the course can be divided into three types: auto-checked tasks, self-checked tasks and tutor-checked tasks.

Auto-checked tasks originated in the earliest learning systems in CALL, where tests in which the respondent must choose one or several correct answers were widely used. The system tells the respondent whether he or she gave the correct answer. Now the range of auto-checkable tasks is much broader. In this course the following types of task were used:

- choosing one or more correct answers;
- correlation of text and text/ pictures/ audio by dragging and dropping elements [Fig. 5];
- drawing up sentences from parts;
- filling a gap in a word or sentence [Fig. 6];
- highlighting different text fragments [Fig.7],
- crosswords,
- vocabulary cards,
- word search games.

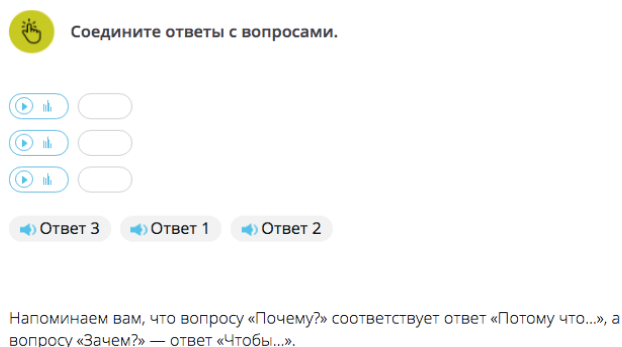


Figure 5: Auto-checkable task with correlation of several audio pieces (matching questions and answers)

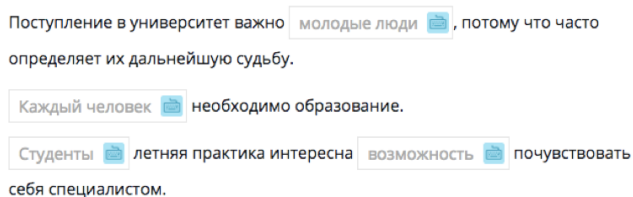


Figure 6: Auto-checkable task with filling the gaps in sentences (the initial grammatical form is highlighted in light gray)

	Именительный падеж Кто? Что?	Винительный падеж Кого? Что?
мужской род	торт, сыр, фотоаппарат	торт, сыр, фотоаппарат
женский род	колбаса́, книга	колбасу́, книгу

■ именительный падеж ■ винительный падеж

Вера купила в магазине **фотоаппарат**.

Виктор купил в магазине **торт, сыр** и **колбасу**.

Это **фотоаппарат**.

Это **торт, сыр** и **колбаса**.

Figure 7: Auto-checkable task with highlighting required text fragments

Self-checked tasks develop students' ability to evaluate their own performance and compare it with a reference, in other words, develop their ability to reflect on educational activity. Several self-checked tasks are included in the course [Fig. 8]:

- repeat a spoken phrase after the model and then compare one's pronunciation with that of the model;
- record the phrase / text and subsequent comparison with the sample.

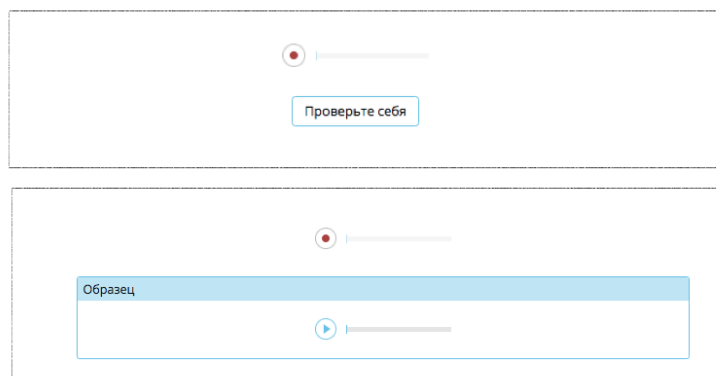


Figure 8: Examples of self-checked tasks

Tutor checked tasks are tasks, the result of which is poorly formalised or is not subject to automatic verification at this stage of development of training systems, provides for an asynchronous check by the teacher: an opportunity to rate, add a comment and make corrections.

The main communicative language practice activity is videoconferencing with a teacher. As autonomous asynchronous learning does not fully support the development of oral communicative competence as yet so it is reasonable to distribute elements of the course between the learning platform and videoconferencing, with the former being used primarily for developing language skills and receptive processes and the latter for

the development of communication skills and productive types of communicative activity (especially speaking).

3 Conclusions

Despite the opportunities offered by new technologies, the creation of LMOOCs is still a challenge for instructional designers. The potentially massive audience for courses limits the possibilities for teacher-student interaction, which is resource-intensive, both in terms of cost and time. The effectiveness of student-student interaction depends on the language level of the students involved. In the early stages of language learning, it is most often used to deal with organisational and technical issues.

When designing a skill-balanced LMOOC, an important role is played by taking into account the peculiarities of modern communication, including communication in the digital environment. Many communicative acts and genres, common at the initial stage of language learning, look unnatural in written format, but this convention is allowed for educational purposes. But the virtual environment of LMOOC allows to redesign of such educational texts, implementing them into digital communication interface, such as instant voice or text messages, social media posts, etc. In the described LMOOC of Russian for beginners, the authenticity of the content and nativity of its presentation in the online course was achieved by using genres and features typical for digital communication.

4 Future Work

Two directions of research should be pursued in the future: the development of more interactive and more connectivist LMOOCs and experimental studies on the effectiveness of certain activities, designs and methods of motivating students. In the first direction, it seems promising to include technologies of peer-to-peer learning, telecollaborations and teletandems within the LMOOC. In the second direction, it is planned to involve methods of educational analytics for research of the effectiveness of specific pedagogical design solutions in the field of LMOOC.

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