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Distance Learning: Professional Foreign Language Training at Pedagogical University

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Abstract

The overall implementation of distance technologies in foreign-language vocational education reveals the need to enhance the methodological development of existing modern teaching tools. Websites with educational content offer a wide variety of online digital learning materials. The question is whether these resources can be effectively implemented in the organization of distance FL learning.

Whereas the study is aimed at the analysis of the educational potential of the Surgut State Pedagogical University (SurGPU) electronic learning managing system (LMS) and the selection of authentic online platforms for distance FL learning education. Moreover, the paper task is to describe the results of the presented Internet resources implementation based on students' opinion survey data.

The material for the study was various digital resources commonly used by the lecturers of the Linguistic Education and Cross-cultural Communication Department (German and French online platforms as well as the University LMS) and data retrieved from questionnaires and interviews of the Foreign Language direction students.

The methods were general theoretical and empirical, including statistical data analysis, critical analysis of the educational material, and the content of the implemented training program.

As a result, the authors reveal active but haphazard use of digital educational resources before the outbreak of the pandemic. However, with the transition to global distance learning, FL students note an increase in digital educational materials used in the educational process, as well as their effective use in the organization of distance learning in the system of professional foreign language education.

Keywords: distance learning resources, learning management system, electronic educational resources, open educational resources, professional foreign language education.

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Introduction

According to sociological research, there is a steady and growing demand for acquiring new knowledge and professional competencies by distance courses. Over the past few years, the turnover of the online education market has increased dramatically.

Education as one of the basic social institutions cannot fail to respond to the challenges of the time. In the context of the ongoing changes, the education system is becoming more flexible, and many traditional approaches to learning are being transferred to a digital environment. Modern methods focused on the skills development of adaptation to new technologies are born in the education system itself, and then supported and cultivated by the state authorities. The public demand for distance forms of educational activity was embodied in the National Priority Project “Modern educational environment in the Russian Federation” and the creation of higher education IT systems in its framework (Presidium of the Presidential Council for Strategic Development and Priority Projects, 2016). The purpose of this system is high-quality and affordable online education via digital technologies.

Many researchers in the field of education note that “in recent decades, the flood of visual content has increased, which has a higher informative load” (Kobzeva, 2017, p. 58). Foreign language education suggests the use of various audio-visual means, but the transition to a polycode format for presenting knowledge and developing skills will inevitably lead to new forms of educational design. Moreover, distance learning in foreign language education, as noted by the various authors, can cause a number of difficulties in the development of communication skills, teamwork, and some others (Kislukhina, 2017).

The consequence of the distance learning approach to the foreign language professional education design is the need for lecturers to select, analyse and classify educational resources of existing extensive digital content for their further implementation in the system of higher education.

Purpose and objectives of the study

This article is aimed to analyse the theoretical and field experience of the foreign language communicative competence development among students of foreign language teaching (FLT) department based on the various distance technologies usage.

Moreover, it is aimed to identify the digital resources' essential characteristics from the perspective of learning activities for the students' professional competencies formation design. Also one of the objectives is to present the applied potential for the use of distance learning in the structure of professional foreign language education of bachelor's degree students.

Literature review

The inclusion of distance learning in the structure of higher education has recently attracted the interest of researchers in the field of pedagogy, linguistics, linguodidactics, and methodology. The research thrust is aimed at studying the theoretical foundations and practical technologies for the digital resources to be used in the educational process.

The phenomenon of "distance learning" is discussed, defined and analysed in various works (Agaponov, Dzhaliashvili, & Kretschman, 2003; Ovsyannikov & Kashin, 2001). The common idea of all the works can be defined as the need to include digital resources in the learning process based on the fundamentals of the proactive teacher - students' interaction.

The majority of authors generally focus on the stages of distance learning format implementing in the higher education curriculum, correlating the success factors of information technologies implementation with the design of the pedagogical process (Nazarenko, 2013; Nikulicheva, Diakova, & Glukhovskaya, 2020; Sysoev, 2013).

Since 2000, the pedagogical community has been conducting researches on the distance forms proliferation. Among them, video lectures, communication via social networks, video design, multimedia presentations, web quests and many others (Agaponov et al., 2003; Akhmetova, 2009; Pavlutsкая & Dubitskaya, 2016; Variyasova, Ivanova, & Karnyushina, 2021).

When selecting digital platforms for teaching students, we relied on the developed models, pedagogical technologies, methods of distance courses design, and criteria for distance learning assessment and online platforms selection (Belova, 2019; Godzhaeva & Tochilina, 2013, Monakhov, 2003; Nazarenko, 2013, Polat, Bukharkina, & Moiseeva, 2004; Rösler, 2014, Sysoev, 2013; Titova & Aleksandrova, 2018).

Despite the variety of existing approaches and methods of digital resources implementation in the foreign languages teaching, it is important to note their common focus on the development of students' foreign language communicative competence through autonomous work, creativity and basic professional competencies improvement. Moreover students' contentment of the distance learning process is to be taken into consideration as one of the aspects of the educational environment study (Driga, 2020).

Methodology

The selection and analysis of authentic online educational platforms was carried out on the basis of criteria developed in the special literature (Belova, 2015) and are presented as follows.

1. Teaching methodology criterion: authenticity; structure; story and educational line (for linear resources); completeness from the standpoint of learning goals; novelty and relevance of information for students; scientific nature; accessibility from the standpoint of language proficiency; the ability to choose tasks in accordance with the language level; the possibility to use in the course of distance education with no reference to the traditional organization of the learning process.
2. Innovation criterion: adaptability (for non-linear resources); interactivity; modelling (full image, information presentation design, 3D visualization); the possibility to assess knowledge; multilingual interface (can act as an optional condition); text search; visualization of students' achievements; variability of tasks and information.
3. Usability criterion (design and ergonomics): contentment; efficiency (the ability to quickly search and output of information); fast learning ability when working with the site interface; memorability of the sequence of work and use of the platform; clear organization of text and graphics; compliance of colour, text, sound and content compliance.

An empirical study performs statistical data analysis of the effectiveness and efficiency of digital technologies implementation in the educational process in foreign languages. In this regard, in the period from 01.05.2020 to 07.05.2020, a survey was conducted among students of 1-5 bachelor's degree courses in the direction of training 44.03.05 Teacher Education (with two training profiles) and students of 1-2 master's degree courses in the direction of training 44.04.01 Teacher Education (the total number of respondents – 144 students).

The survey related to the content of training sessions was held by university teachers in the distance learning mode through the learning management system of SurGPU (LMS Moodle system), along with other digital resources. The University has a practice of questioning and interviewing students and lecturers at the end of the academic year on the basis of a written special consent of students for the processing of personal data. This study allows to identify the positive aspects of the learning process, as well as to take into account the shortcomings in the organizational and content component of the educational system.

To study the educational results there was also a research held to analyse the use of the LMS by the professors of the Linguistic Education and Cross-cultural Communication Department (SurGPU). The analysis of the work of the teachers was conducted starting from the 2018-2019 till 2020-2021 academic year. The data was gathered and studied according to the standardized demands for the online courses and their actual design performed by the professors.

According to the criteria suggested by the study under discussion and the students and lecturers responses, the following two major groups of electronic educational resources were implemented and examined:

- authentic online platforms for German and French languages learning (Deutsche Welle website, Goethe-Institut platform “Deutsch für dich”, “tv5monde”, “RFI bonjour la France”, The Framapad website);
- learning management system of Surgut State Pedagogical University (SurGPU).

Results

Firstly, authentic information-driven websites used by the professors of the Linguistic Education and Cross-cultural Communication Department (SurGPU) are under discussion. These websites suggest topical issues discussion, which allows students to get acquainted with different media resources, and also take part in the discussion, state their own opinion, and perform training tasks. As a rule, the material on the websites is organized into sections, each of which has its own specificity in terms of content, presentation of educational material, and forms of training.

The implementation of the material within the SurGPU distance FL learning framework

For instance, the news channel “Deutsche Welle” (<https://www.dw.com/de/deutsch-lernen>) offers a wide range of various electronic resources for learning German in the section “Deutsch lernen”. This is a set of available materials from level A1 to C1 of the CEFR for “immersion in the authentic atmosphere of the German language”: texts, video clips, audio materials, podcasts, worksheets, tests.

The “Deutschkurse” section offers comprehensive training courses for different levels of study. At the initial stage of training, the professors of the Linguistic Education and Cross-cultural Communication Department (SurGPU) use the training course “Deutschtrainer” (A1-A2), which includes 100 bilingual lessons (the most used are the English-German version, taking into account the first foreign language studied by students), containing a variety of lexical topics. Deutschtrainer helps to replenish the basic vocabulary for everyday communication, improve pronunciation, and develop listening skills. For students of advanced level (B2), the adventure game show “Ticket nach Berlin” is of great interest. The series includes texts, audio and video materials of a country-specific nature, handouts, interactive exercises, and self-assessment tests.

The section “Deutsch XXL” is popular among students. It presents didactic information materials that allow one to improve the German language and at the same time learn about world events. The materials are accompanied by a lexical and linguistic commentary, interactive training and control tasks that can be downloaded in PDF format and used in the classroom, as well as for organizing distance learning and independent work.

In addition to ready-made solutions, the educational platform “Deutsche Welle” offers tools for creating electronic learning materials: worksheets, tests, crosswords. Didactic comments provide background information and specific help in developing lessons.

Extensive educational content for distance learning of the German language was developed by the Goethe-Institut (<https://www.goethe.de>). A whole series of applications is available to any user and allows them to learn German in a captivating and interactive way. Students’ attention is mostly drawn to the international Internet community of the Goethe-Institut “Deutsch für dich” (Deutsch für dich, 2021), which is intended for students learning German at any level, as well as teachers and lecturers. All students of the Surgut State Pedagogical University of “Teacher Education” training direction of “Foreign languages” profile, who choose to study German as one of their profiles, are registered on the educational platform of the Goethe-Institut “Deutsch für dich” and have the opportunity to use all the resources offered.

News channels such as “tv5monde” (<http://www.tv5monde.com/>), “RFI bonjour la France” (<https://savoirs.rfi.fr/fr/>) are used for French language learners. There students get acquainted with various reports, programs, chronicles of the day, etc. RFI bonjour la France is a unique resource where various information headings are presented. Special attention is paid to the events in the francophone countries of the African continent, which, of course, expands the socio-cultural competence of students. Video and audio materials fill the information gap, creating the effect of being in the center of events.

Another advantage of the resource is the ability to create learning materials: tests, quizzes, oral and written exercises from level A1 to C2. Thus, a student with the elementary level of the French language, as well as with advanced, is able to develop their professional competencies.

The French language website tv5monde is popular among students as it is aimed not only at students (*apprendre le français*), but also at teachers. The digital resource contains a separate podcast for teachers (*enseigner le français*). Easy navigation through the levels of language proficiency, a large number of categories that meet the needs of learning and teaching French, the video clips with texts and tasks, a large-scale database of various tests, tasks of a creative nature make the tv5monde website an indispensable tool in the structure of distance learning.

Students are also offered to watch films on the IFcinéma website (<https://ifcinema.institutfrancais.com/fr>). A variety of films successfully fits into the study of various educational topics. The site has an option to select the language and subtitles. Depending on the communicative task, the teacher sets the viewing frame. A good option for students studying French and English is to compare the versions of translations of a particular film or film plot into English and French.

Distance education, on the one hand, contributes to the individualization of learning. Students can learn at an individual pace, taking into account their own interests and needs. On the other hand, information and communication technologies contribute to the organization of group interaction, the development of collaborative forms of work. For this purpose, the possibilities of the electronic educational management systems of our university are also used. For instance, educational interaction is organized on the LMS of the university using the Wiki social communication technology for the development of one of the most complex types of speech activity – writing.

Collaborative writing based on Wiki technology involves the joint performance of tasks for the development of writing skills: description of facts, phenomena or events; opinion expression; argumentation; generalization of information obtained from various sources; filling out a questionnaire or forms of various types; drawing up a short or detailed plan; writing business letters, reports, messages, reviews, essays and various articles; creating other works, projects; compiling a thematic dictionary.

In the foreign language educational process the whole range of LMS functions are to be used: creating texts, correcting them, changing them, comparing different versions, and then discussing the results obtained. Experience shows that the introduction of Wiki technology in the educational process in a foreign language encourages group activities, promotes the creation of collective projects.

Here collective written documents, when students interact with each other in order to perform it, discuss the content and create a joint written product, are suggested. At the same time, by correcting the content and correcting mistakes, they learn from each other and thereby increase their level of knowledge.

The results of the online platforms implementation survey among students of SurGPU

The analysis of students' responses allowed us to determine the suitability of information platforms used by the lecturers of the Linguistic Education and Cross-cultural Communication Department (SurGPU) for the implementation of training programs in the distance learning mode, to identify the reasons why students consider certain platforms to be effective or ineffective.

The survey was held according to the criteria described in the methodology section. The results of the survey are presented in Diagrams 1, 2, 3.

Diagram 1. Generalized results of the survey on the digital resources and teaching methodology compliance

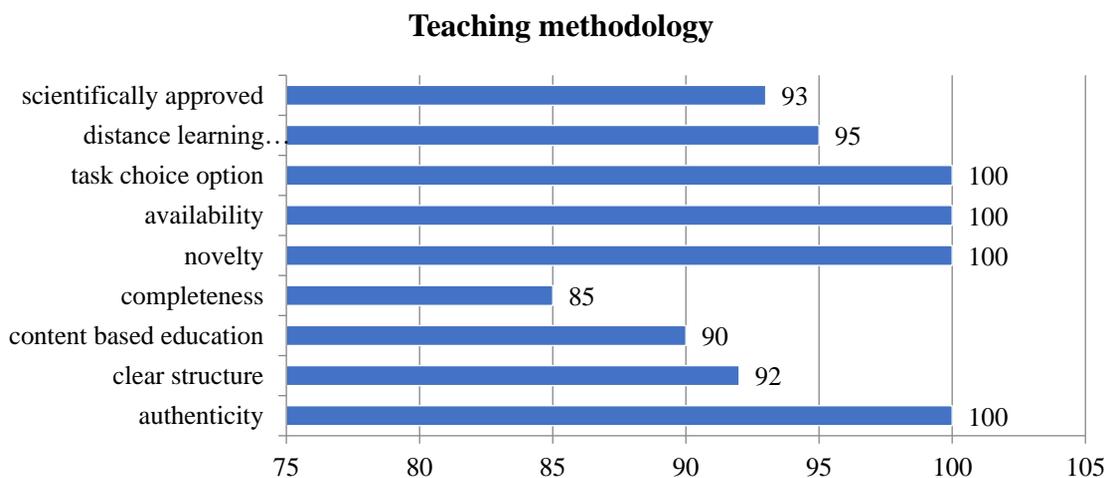


Diagram 2. Generalized results of the survey on the digital resources and innovation criterion compliance

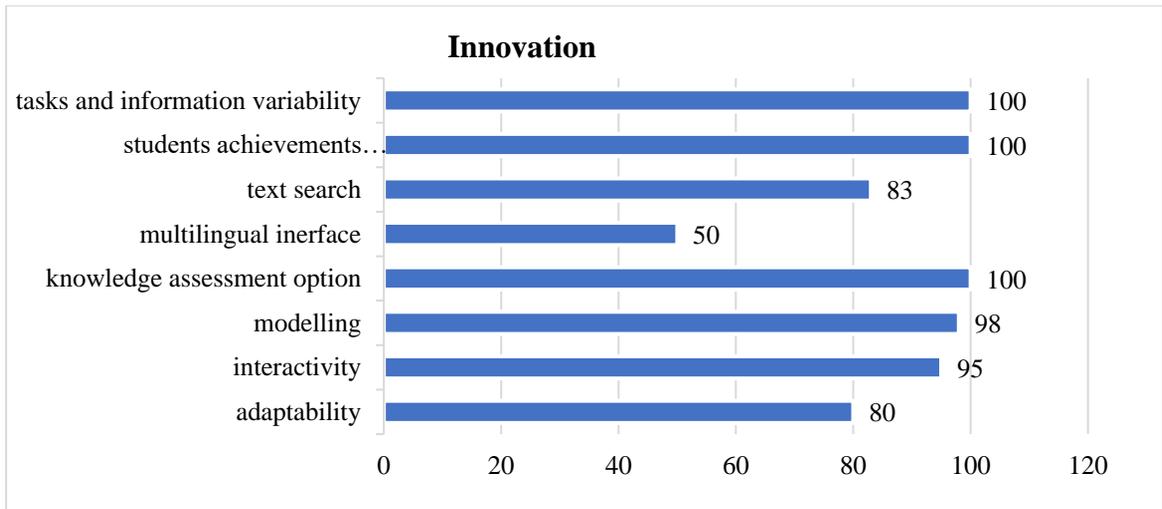
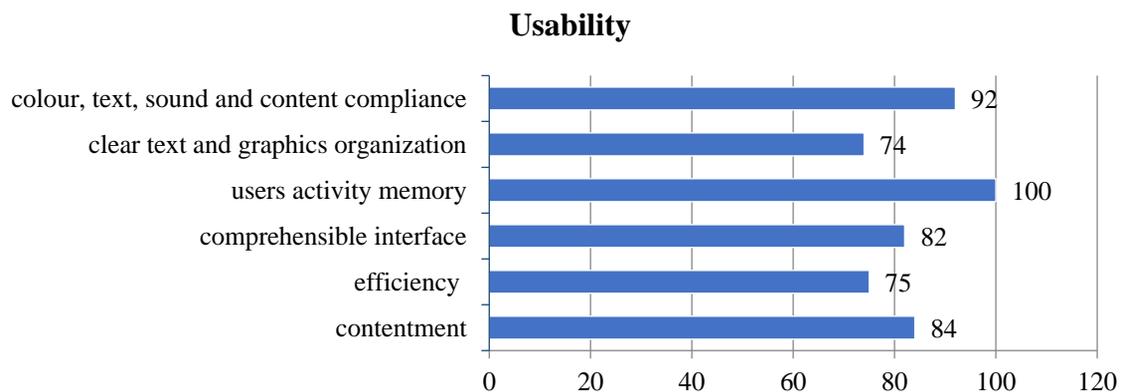


Diagram 3. Generalized results of the survey on the digital resources and usability criterion compliance



According to the results of the survey the average percentage of the proposed digital resources compliance according to the teaching methodology criterion is 95%, according to the innovation and usability – 88% and 84.5%, respectively.

As the diagrams demonstrate, the analysed authentic online platforms meet the requirements for the organization of distance foreign languages learning.

The respondents consider the following to be the main positive characteristics of distance learning based on the resources provided (subject to a multiple choice of answers):

- ability to plan your time independently (complete tasks at a convenient time) – 82 %;

- variety of auxiliary training materials, tools and resources – 26 %;
- ability to show creativity in the process of completing tasks – 15 %.

11% of students suggested adding their own options to the list of resources, 7% approve of the choice of all the options presented, 4% of students find it difficult to assess the organization of distance learning.

The generalized results of the survey demonstrate the overall interest of students in working on various online platforms. One of the advantages that all respondents note is the opportunity to show independence and creativity, which directly correlate with the objectives of national educational projects in the field of distance learning.

Regarding students distance learning at the University LMS Moodle platform the analysis of the courses was performed. Thus, by March 2019 all of the required activities are implemented by lecturers, including interactive and evaluative ones. However, it should be noted that there is a low percentage of uploads of such elements of the LMS as a test, seminar, etc. These elements are present only in 4% of courses. Assignments for students are uploaded in 62.4% of the courses, files with various references and additional information in 60% of the courses.

By the beginning of February 2020 lecturers implement all 9 required types of activities, including interactive and evaluative ones. However, there is still a low percentage of attachment to such elements as a test, seminar (3% of courses). The Task element is attached in 48% of courses, files with various references and additional information in 50% of courses, as well as files, folders, and pages – 15%. There is a greater variety of elements and resources, on average. Each course has 4 types out of 9, including such LMS elements and activities as test and seminar, wiki, and crossword puzzle. Interaction with students is carried out in the work of 38% of the courses (the assessment journal is formed in 79 disciplines out of 209).

By the end of February – beginning of March 2021, the LMS of SurGPU is undergoing an update. More advanced interactive learning elements and resources are becoming available, as well as the interface of the LMS is changing. In addition, the majority of teachers (86%), including part-time teachers, have implemented such elements of the system as tests (including an essay), assignment, and the use of interactive content.

Discussion

The presented algorithm along with the Federal Standards demands for selecting and implementing digital resources in the process of foreign language education should in our opinion take into account the specificities, educational content, and management features of the educational process. The effectiveness of distance education can be ensured by the development of clear assessment criteria at each stage of working with the presented digital resources, including peer-to-peer assessment. Educational content also requires further classification in terms of its effectiveness for the development of individual components of foreign language communicative competence. Thus, the combination of the discussed components might serve as a kind of motivational link for the lecturer and students, creating conditions for a successful distance learning environment.

Since e-learning can create a wider and more diverse learning experience than the passive didactic mode of work, it also has the potential to provide new and innovative assessment methods and systems.

Conclusion

The results of the study can be used in the design, organization and implementation of the process of training bachelors and undergraduates in the system of professional foreign language education. Distance learning technologies allow us to foreground the activity component of learning when students solve professional cases, to develop the communicative and information-communication competencies of students, to individualize the process of reproduction and creativity in the system of foreign language speech activity, to form the ability and readiness of students for self-education, self-assessment and peer-to-peer assessment.

The presented analysis serves as one of the ways to solve the stated research problem.

Further studies might help us to formulate and solve the following issues:

- development of a more detailed algorithm for various digital educational resources implementation, depending on the type of professional competencies being developed;
- criteria-based assessment framework design that is comprehensive for lecturers and students in terms of the use of a specific digital resource;
- design of the foreign language communicative competence development within the framework of distance learning and specific tasks of the training course.

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Competing interests

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