Chapter 7

Online Collaborative Learning as a Way of Boosting Language and Teaching Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

A pedagogical attempt to increase the effectiveness of foreign language teaching led to pairing Russian students who are obtaining a Master’s degree in language teaching methodology with those of a distance department learning English as a foreign language to collaboratively solve educational problems online. As a course instructor plays the role of a facilitator gradually giving students more and more academic freedom, the educational process increases learner autonomy. Current research findings indicate that such a course is effective for both target groups of learners. By directly applying the received competence to online practice, those who study language teaching methodology learn more effectively and acquire new skills associated with successfully working with computer technologies, while those who study by distance learning receive better academic guidance and a more individualized approach from their senior peers.

INTRODUCTION

The task under investigation is complex in that it aims at solving two methodological problems at the same time – improving a foreign language teaching course for master students by bridging the gap between theory and practice, and increasing the effectiveness of a foreign language course for university distant learners by organizing their inter-term studies efficiently and offering them a more individualized approach. The problems are affected by specific studying conditions in correspondence departments at the university which acts as the context in which the course presented here was developed. Due to recent changes in the standard of higher linguistic education in Russia, the number of hours devoted to English and language teaching methodology has been cut, but the learning goals have remained ambitious. Students

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of the featured distant learning department have to learn a lot independently (without any instructor being present to guide them) during the inter-term period in order to pass their tests when the examination session comes. It is especially counterproductive for those who study a foreign language because of the specific nature of the academic discipline. Students choose to learn through a correspondence course for various reasons. For example, some come from remote regions, some already have their major and are looking to pursue their minor, mostly in English, while others cannot afford to study full-time. But not all of them are able to study autonomously and, subsequently, may fail their exams. Moreover, distant students enter the university with a different level of language proficiency which necessitates a more individualized approach to their studies.

In terms of master students who study language teaching methodology, some lack competence and need more practice. The age range of these students at the education site is from 19 to 35 years old. All of these students are native speakers of the Russian language pursuing a degree in a linguistics university. Their English language level varies from intermediate-low to advanced-low based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines. As for their former educational background, the students are heterogeneous. They are graduates of various universities and have learning backgrounds in different scientific fields. Further, as the Russian educational system is currently under reform, the university curriculum for master students is mostly theory-based and lacks a practical approach. This problem has resulted in the creation of a remedial course where theory and practice contribute equally to the course’s final goals.

A traditional foreign language teaching course at the education site features a series of lectures where students take down the information that the instructor delivers to them in front of the class. These lectures are followed by a number of seminars organized in the form of a dialogue between the instructor and students. The course usually lasts one semester and is interrupted by a period when master students conduct empirical research studies. Throughout the course, students learn how to choose the best available course book, design communicative activities, use various methods for teaching receptive and productive skills, teach English in large heterogeneous classes to young and adult learners, plan a series of lessons, and design classroom assessments. In addition, they are engaged in developing their classroom management skills and lesson observations. Traditionally, the course is almost entirely theory-based, with the result that students often complete it without gaining practical experience of how to put the received knowledge to real world use.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The newly-designed remedial course at the education site is based on a pedagogical flip and the uses of modern computer technologies. But, unlike other flipped online courses, students are engaged in online collaborative activities in English where master students position themselves as instructors providing distant students with guidance and individual feedback.

The so-called “flipped classroom” inverts traditional teaching methods. Dr. Eric Mazur of Harvard University has been investigating this type of learning since the early 1990s, and many other instructors have been using this learning method for even longer. The terminology “flipped classroom” was initially used in 2007. The flipped classroom model is considered to have been first introduced by Jonathan Bergman and Aaron Sams, who began to use technology to record PowerPoint presentations (Bergman & Sams, 2012).
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