

VIVAT ACADEMIA, VIVANT PROFESSORES!
CHALLENGES OF TEACHING PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION IN
FOREIGN LANGUAGES AMIDST GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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This paper is dedicated to challenges of transitioning the educational process to online learning. To present an objective analysis the authors have compared the experience of two Russian universities – MGIMO University and Samara National Research University in the field of foreign language teaching, in particular professional English. The focus of the paper is on difficulties faced by the faculty and the ways academics coped with them.

The authors highlight the specificity and peculiarities of such a complicated form of education as distance e-learning. Comparative analysis of online platforms, which are mostly used for the organization of e-learning, reveals their benefits and major drawbacks. Furthermore, the authors reflect upon how learning material is blended and assimilated in order to form an e-course. As one of acute pressing problems, the complexity of students' knowledge assessment is described. The goal of the paper predetermined the necessity to carry out a survey to accumulate and summarize data on teachers' and students' individual experiences of the newly formed online educational environment. As the survey indicates, both professors and students consider e-learning to be a real breakthrough. On the other hand, the authors conclude that currently it can be only an alternative to the more traditional forms of education, since it can't be relevant enough to teaching various aspects of professional communication at universities.

Key words: online education, e-learning, professional English, teaching methodology, challenges, knowledge assessment.

This review compares and analyzes the experience of two Russian universities – MGIMO University (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) and Samara National Research University – education institutions with different location, aspirations and culture, in their forced transition to online learning.

The Internet resources have been extensively and effectively incorporated and used by a greater number of our colleagues for more than a decade, although the selected learning material and sources as well as the frequency and quantity have been tested for applicability and properly refined. In the regular education process all this learning material is organically blended and assimilated forming a course.

What is more, distance education itself has long been an alternative to classes at a traditional brick-and-mortar university. The word “alternative” implies availability as another possibility or choice, something that provides two or more options. Meanwhile, for Russian universities there were no possibilities or options to choose from – thus, we faced a real

challenge. For the majority of us, well-reputed lecturers, with the older generation taking the lead, the challenge initially turned into a fearful stress. Though stress is an integral part of a challenge. Adrenaline generated by tension and fear helps the humanity move forward and farther. That is what we heavily relied on and what we were obliged and bound to do.

What is in common between the two above mentioned educational institutions? Prior to the start of the online teaching-learning process, there were some instructions developed by both of the universities, as well as seminars and short-term training sessions conducted, aimed at raising awareness.

Both of the universities also managed to develop efficient methodological recommendations to implement distance education. These recommendations provide the faculty and the students with the guidance how to interact using electronic information and educational environment (EIEE), e-learning, distance learning educational technologies (DLET).

The main difference was due to the distinctive circumstances we faced with – in Moscow there was only one week of e-studies, with professors delivering classes from the university classrooms and auditoriums, equipped with the university's devices, gadgets as well as access to the Internet and Webinar.ru platform, which did not prove impeccable though. All this time faculty members were provided with an available and sustainable technical support service in case the internet connection or software turned faulty, which still did not make the process flawless. Whereas Samara National Research University enabled their teachers with the option of teaching from home from the very beginning.

It is worth noting that in order to implement e-learning it has been proposed to take into consideration several resources, services and mechanisms. First of all, teachers working from home are supposed to have the opportunity to post information on third-party resources, such as cloud storage (e.g. Mail.ru, Google Drive files), to use services for conferences and webinars (e.g. BigBlueButton), third-party mail servers for messaging (e.g. Mail.ru, Yandex, Gmail), social networks (e.g. VK, Facebook, Whatsapp), personal websites. In this case, it is required to inform students about the platforms where all the information and assignments are posted. Also, the faculty are offered to reconsider their courses and disciplines in terms of the university's own system of distance learning educational technology (DLET). In addition, online broadcasts are provided with the available resources by the university, in some cases prior request is necessary. Alternatively, the faculty can use streaming services, hosting platforms, as well as platforms for conducting webinars (e.g. Youtube, Skype, Twitch). Thus, choosing from the numerous platforms for distance e-communication – Skype, Webinar, Zoom, Google Hangouts and many others among them – most of the teachers and lecturers opted to proceed with Zoom, the platform providing a more resilient connection, options for recording and saving documents and video sessions, virtual blackboards, screen-sharing, with priority to users' privacy and safety.

The proposed mechanisms and working with foregoing services are one of the complexities for the faculty and teachers as their own level of technical and software training is not high enough, especially among the advanced-aged. Moreover, we always strive to create a rich English language learning environment in English classes and communicate in professional English only. Nevertheless, as our colleagues from Samara National Research University confessed (and this opinion is partially shared by us), the necessity to regularly

contact support services to solve numerous technical issues during broadcasts has revealed a great number of troubles in establishing fully-fledged oral communication with students in English.

Despite the disadvantages, we would like to mention an advantage which is the messenger built into the personal account that allows quick communication between the faculty and the students within the electronic information and educational environment of the university. Students have the opportunity to receive information and give immediate feedback to their tutors if they have accepted or completed the assignment. Nevertheless, such written communication in the messenger is also supposed to be in professional English which is also mandatory for this type of communication and provides additional practice.

Moreover, the faculty of Samara National Research University were asked to choose an online course of leading universities recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia. Despite a rich collection of online courses, a wide full-textured scientific base of domestic and foreign electronic educational and scientific materials in a variety of repositories and library systems, we have faced with a lack of alternative for a full or partial replacement of our academic discipline in professional English. As for the policies of MGIMO University, it was initially required to adapt the essential course material to the needs of e-studies in the shortest time possible.

Considering the positive: firstly, a lot of time, previously spent on commuting, has been saved for the people – both teachers and students of MGIMO University and Samara students only. Thus, an unexpected and at the same time pleasant outcome of the transition to distance education was the improvement in students' attendance of online classes. It turned out that the results of some students' current control got better. On the one hand, the new digital format motivated them to study and, on the other hand, it allowed them to combine their educational process with work. This way, both of the universities witnessed attendance figures growth in most of the groups, on average, by 15%. Furthermore, even some minor malaises or indispositions did not prevent the students and lecturers from attending the classes online.

However, it is undeniable that how skillful any teacher can become depends on the experience. It takes more than one year of hard work and effort not only to hone the pedagogical skills of preparing and presenting learning material to students, but also to put theoretical knowledge of psychology into practice. It should be highlighted, that each student is distinguished by individual characteristics of information perception, especially related to their professional sphere, and getting this information in English makes the whole process much more complicated. By unifying the learning process under a standardized template digital format, we sort of deprive our students of multichannel sources to gain information. Moreover, we have to wait much longer for answers to questions that have suddenly arisen. It used to be much more effective to ask or comment directly in classes in order to assess the degree of assimilation of the material.

Here we can roughly distinguish between the two types of activities with language groups – technical performance of typical model exercises and assignments versus creative tasks. Thus, monotonous performance of the drills, for instance, in Business English lessons did not show any difference with face-to-face in-class teaching-learning process. They were all carried out as appropriate with a high level of involvement of all the students. Whereas creative activity tasks and practice appeared ambiguous – dependent on the assignment and personality of a particular student. Thus, unlimited two-way screen sharing enabled and encouraged some motivated and industrious students to prepare and come up with more visually-based assignments in the form of a mini-presentation. On the other hand, the availability of numerous

gadgets out of the teacher's sight made it tempting for some students to use various apps for automated text translation in such aspect as English for professional purposes, Economic and Environmental translation courses.

If we compare the traditional scheme of having classes with e-classes, we will see the difference. The traditional one is the "teacher" – "student" model. In this case, the quality of the lesson depends directly on the efforts and knowledge of the teacher, how masterfully the learning material for lectures, practical and laboratory classes is prepared. Hence, when switching to distance learning, the scheme looks like the "teacher" – "computer / tablet / cell phone" – "programmer (technical support service)" – "student" model. In case we add other links to the traditional chain, we get additional time costs for data processing and transfer. Thus, to achieve success in the educational process, the teacher must have advanced knowledge of the computer, cell phone and tablet, be able to understand all the intricacies of device connectivity and setting up various kinds of programs. Now, the members of the faculty feel sort of distracted from their original task, and it cannot but cause a large number of negative emotions because you should be guaranteed high-speed broadband Internet connection with stable data transfer, and your electronic devices have to meet all modern system requirements, and you have to easily cope with the consequences of regular updates. At present, as practice shows, the faculty of Samara National Research University have to regularly coordinate work on emerging issues and turn to responsible services and personnel. Only thanks to a high-quality centralized accumulation of data on the existing problems and competently structured interaction with the university departments it is possible to successfully resolve all the troubles that inevitably arise. We can assume that some complications and problems, which sometimes emerge in the teaching-from-home mode, have to be dealt with by academics on their own. At the same time some minor percentage of teachers appeared to be either computer-illiterate or non-equipped for such a sudden but inevitable type of interaction.

Any interaction implies bilateral communication. Thus, connection should remain stable all the time during the class. With most of the students having left their dormitories in Moscow and Samara for remote parts of Russia for the period of the quarantine hardships, stable connection for some of them appeared to be a real luxury and at times unachievable.

All in all, and in addition to the mentioned above, one of the most complicated methodological problems that foreign language teachers had to face in the process of online learning is the organization and monitoring of students' knowledge on the subject.

On the one hand, sustaining the control and regulatory process by the teacher via feedback tools does not differ much from the usual forms of assessment in classroom: there is an opportunity to monitor and direct students' activity in understanding and mastering theoretical knowledge, performing practical tasks, generalizing and systematizing knowledge. With the help of modern Internet technologies, students can do quizzes and tests and automatically get the grade and comments of the teacher unless the performance requires some creative activity on the part of the learners.

In this regard, online test creation tools with automatic and manual assessment systems turned out to be rather effective, e.g. google-forms, testmoz, etc. This form of evaluating students' cognitive performance in a distance education is convenient because it allows prompt assessment of knowledge. However, such tests have a number of requirements. Thus, not too many questions or assignments should be included into the test, since it is necessary to save

time and take into account the quick fatigue of students; questions are to be formulated in many different ways; the test requires careful planning, practical evaluation and elimination of shortcomings before its widespread use.

As for other forms of knowledge assessment, we can point out a recitation in a direct dialogue mode using a video camera or an audio system. Special programs and various platforms for organizing audio and video conferences (e.g. Zoom, Webinar, Skype, etc.) make it possible to monitor and test student knowledge on a real-time basis.

When choosing an exact form of knowledge assessment in teaching the English professional language, it is necessary to correlate the selected mode with the content of the mastered material and used methodological technique.

On the other hand, online education implies diverse difficulties in the process of assessment of students' knowledge. What compounds it is the specificity of communication via the Internet. And here again, as well as in the teaching process itself, despite advanced communication technologies, certain issues remain in abeyance, such as verification of the student's personality, communication quality and feedback speed. In other words, monitoring can be complicated by a hardware or software failure. For its elimination, one has to provide the storage of data on a reliable medium, to understand quickly at what exact moment during the recitation session the information transfer ceased.

One of the most acute problems we had to cope with is cheating, for students have the opportunity to use additional devices, translation software, dictionaries, and various sources of information. As the experience shows, even if test materials on, for instance, economic translation are presented for a rather short period of time, students are able to use the google-translate app and pass off the translation made by the system for their own. This requires the teacher to be more concentrated and attentive, as he/she cannot be absolutely certain whether the students completed all the assignments on their own. Moreover, this way it appears senseless to conduct course tests at different classes and different period of time for the language groups, as students are willingly sharing the material and results via messengers.

To improve the quality and reliability of students' knowledge assessment in the process of teaching professional English, special measures are to be taken. For example: in order to accurately identify the student, a system of individual passwords and codes for accessing resources is used; various verifiers and identifiers are applied during tests so that there is no unauthorized access; mandatory use of video cameras and audio equipment; limiting the time for written tests or recitation; random mixing of tasks from the bank of testing materials for different groups.

As we can see, the testing techniques used in the process of distance education should meet a number of fundamentally different requirements compared to conventional knowledge assessment. Testing modes should be aimed at evaluating a specific set of competencies, be aligned with the specifics of online education, take into account the human factor and the imperfection of equipment and software, and fix the dynamics of mastering the material of the curriculum.

Thus, the transition to online education shows the necessity for the introduction of new forms of knowledge assessment: e-mail, web forums, audio and video conferences. But still, the main form of testing is the one with the obligatory physical presence of a student. At the same time, remote test of knowledge involves some difficulties which make it irrelevant for teaching some subjects and aspects in universities.

Combining our impression of the experience we have gained through distant interaction with our language students, it is worth highlighting that the most positive thing we obtained

from this experience is the experience itself of acting under pressure and succeeding, strengthening our unity with each other and the students. On par with the tense ambience of the online teaching-learning process we gained the positive – closeness, rapport and solidarity being put all together onto one screen.

We all performed greatly and quickly. What could have taken us maybe a couple of years was arranged as fast as possible not to lose a moment's time.

As the opinion poll of the teachers of both universities has revealed – the vast majority of us are satisfied with the results as they showed a high level of professionalism and adaptability of the teachers as well as enthusiasm and flexibility of the students. Nevertheless, due to the physical/mental and psychological pressure experienced, most of the teachers and students of both the universities perceive distant education exclusively as an addition, extension or inclusion to the traditional forms of education, something temporal and exceptional, even phenomenal, though quite applicable. For even the new millennium introverted generation of the galloping technologies and booming innovations desperately requires a teacher not behind the lifeless cold monitor but vibrant and spirited humans, imparting knowledge and vitality, deserving a real feedback. For otherwise how could one interpret our students' words "We miss you".

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