COLLABORATIVE ATMOSPHERE IN E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: HOW TO CREATE IT UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Present day educational establishments are facing new challenges under the COVID-19 pandemic, and responses to these challenges bring together educators all over the world. Only two years ago the problems of face-to-face learning, distance learning, blended learning were a matter of theoretical debate, but now they have become a practical necessity. To prevent disruption educators and IT specialists have been working out new approaches to e-learning. This study provides the analysis of the development of active learning methods in teaching foreign languages and cross-cultural studies at the Moscow State Institute of International relations (MGIMO University), the Kosygin State University of Russia, the Moscow Aviation Institute (MAI University) under the condition of the lock-down caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Modern digitally networked society still needs social interaction, so does education. Due to prolonged period of lock-down and isolation a great part of educators and learners have testified to the lack of personal involvement in interaction and voted for the return to face-to-face learning which is characterized by a high level of collaboration during classes. Teaching foreign languages and cross-cultural studies at the above-mentioned universities is focused on developing professional competences of students in order to enable them to be relevant to professional needs and competitive at the modern labor market. Thus, foreign language efficiency implies writing, reading and speaking skills applicable for professional use as well as a good command of communication skills in combination with emotional social interaction.

The present study is focused on the changes in collaboration between students and tutors in e-learning environment under the COVID-19 pandemic. Active learning methods in teaching foreign languages and cross-cultural studies used by the tutors at the above-mentioned universities are exemplified in case-studies, role-plays, debate, panel discussions, project work organized and performed under lock-down conditions with the use of available e-platforms.

The study has demonstrated the benefits of role-plays and panel discussions which stimulate students to perform real communication, express opinions and feelings. Motivated students work in a collaborative atmosphere: students may be divided into teams competing for better results in presenting their project, and they practice communication techniques of persuasion and argument when each member of the team is sharing responsibility for the team's results. On the other hand, their partners learn to react accordingly. The research has demonstrated great interest of students in personalization of their stances and views which enables them to live and analyze collaboration under different social and professional conditions. At the same time the study has testified to a high level of student engagement and academic progress.

Thus, the research has proved the relevance of active learning methods even in e-learning environment as a reasonable solution to the problem of deficiency of social interaction under lockdown conditions. The conclusions may help develop effective instruments of providing collaborative atmosphere under current conditions of virtual or blended learning.

Keywords: e-learning environment, verbal collaboration, active learning methods, foreign languages, cross-cultural studies.

1 INTRODUCTION

Modern digitally networked society still needs social interaction, so does education. Due to prolonged period of lock-down and isolation a great part of educators and learners have testified to the lack of personal involvement in interaction and voted for the return to face-to-face learning which is characterized by a high level of collaboration during classes. Teaching foreign languages and cross-

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cultural studies at the above-mentioned universities is focused on developing professional competences of students in order to enable them to be relevant to professional needs and competitive at the modern labor market. Thus, foreign language efficiency implies writing, reading and speaking skills applicable for professional use as well as a good command of communication skills in combination with emotional social interaction.

The digitalization of educational process provides a wide range of opportunities as well as challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a divide between the level of IT literacy of educators and students: teachers and tutors at all levels have been working hard to cope with new challenges and catch up with the recent developments of IT sphere so that to apply them in the educational process and provide its continuity and high quality. No one would argue that the 21st century students are digital natives: they get used to browsing the Internet and working with electronic gadgets at an early age whereas a major part of modern teachers were born and educated in the era of paper text-books, cinema and out-door games.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has proved the necessity to incorporate IT advances in the educational process to overcome the lockdown crisis. The Moscow State Institute of International relations (MGIMO University), the Kosygin State University of Russia and the Moscow Aviation Institute (MAI University) have embraced the opportunities of the digitalization and succeeded in overcoming the force-majeure situation caused by the lockdown. The universities have adapted their e-learning platforms for new needs, have elaborated new programs and rescheduled the old ones to secure continuous engagement of students in educational process under the guidance of teachers as well as to promote a collaborative atmosphere in e-learning environment.

This paper can be viewed as a report on two-case studies: the teachers and students at the Kosygin State University of Russia and Moscow Aviation Institute have been involved in research of collaborative atmosphere in e-learning environment in the period since the outbreak of the pandemic.

The paper is focused on active learning methods in teaching foreign languages and cross-cultural studies used by the tutors at the above-mentioned universities.

2 METHODOLOGY

Enhancing engagement of students in educational process seems to be in the focus of experts' discussion. Most of them highlight that we are living in a new educational space which is characterized by the emergence of a new type of student due to new career requirements in the current global digital environment (Tsvetkova, Solovova, 2015). The pandemic has intensified this process of adjustment of education to the new environment: across the curriculum, students are expected to develop attitudes and acquire skills that are necessary in social interaction, problem-solving and continuous self-development and learning (Sahlberg, 2004). There is no denying that new educational environment has changed the essence of an educator's profession: instead of teaching, educators are to develop learners who are motivated and interested in life-long learning and upgrading their skills to be competitive (Burgess, Sievertsen, 2020; Verbitsky, 1991; Szucs, 2009; Kurbakova, Arupova, Bereznev, 2018; Donato, Conchell Diranzo, Rodríguez-Cantón Pascual, Martines, 2020). Modern teachers are facing new challenges in terms of reshaping programs, developing new courses, integrating IT opportunities, social networking appropriate for their students' needs (Dillenbourg, 2000; Macdonald, 2003; Sahlberg, 2004.

Some experts also raise another vital problem –the one of social interaction during academic process: they call the lack of face-to-face interaction as one of the disadvantages of distant learning (Kurbakova, Kozhevnikova, Vasilyeva, Kurbakov, 2020). The lack of 'person-to-person' interaction under the lock-down conditions should be compensated by development of collaboration in virtual educational environment.

Educational collaboration are exemplified in case-studies, role-plays, debate, panel discussions, project work organized and performed under lock-down conditions with the use of available e-platforms.

Current linguistic researchers are increasingly employing the case-based reasoning system to the analysis of human speech, its genres and national peculiarities. The contemporary psycholinguistics have proved that emotions produce a vital impact on human behavior and all spheres of human activities, including speech communication. There is a necessity to examine verbal means of exteriorization of emotions in speech in different cultures. Teaching a foreign language should provide

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a profound knowledge of national peculiarities of the emotional component of speech. Students ought to develop communicative skills of using verbal means (modal verbs, their grammatical and lexical equivalents, phraseology, etc.) in compliance with a situation and intention (Kurbakova, Knyazeva, Arupov, 2018; Kurbakova, 2014).

These assumptions have formed the basis for the research into the tendencies of promotion of collaborative atmosphere at ESP classes in e-learning environment.

The research included the development of a questionnaire (consisting of 27 questions) for teachers and students on forms of classes which provide for active learning and mastering both language skills and professional competences.

The authors as the moderators of the questionnaire collected the answers of 145 students and 34 teachers, counted and analyzed them. Thematic analysis was employed to examine the findings from the questionnaire. The results were further validated with the records in the discussion board and compared with the results of the previous works. Hereby the authors present the first findings, which undoubtedly, need further discussion and validation.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Developing communicative competence

Teaching English for special purposes is aimed at developing students' skills of communication. Almost all respondents (99 per cent) voted for traditional forms of language classes as 'they bring more benefits in the process of acquiring knowledge of a foreign language and brushing up speech skills'. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, students have testified to 'certain psychological difficulties' due to the lack of verbal interaction during the lockdown. 140 students (90 per cent) conceded that they experienced 'hunger' for person-to-person communication during the period of self-isolation. Every participant admitted that communication competence needs social interaction and networking 'can't substitute personal intimacy of human relationships'.

For overcoming psychological crisis and stress at ESP classes teachers vote for including more role-plays. Though this form of active learning is not new, it may be revived by means of new reliable Internet resources (Wang, Dostál, 2018). Thus, most teachers underline that they make a vast use of role-plays and stress that every role-play should be well-planned and well-moderated. For instance, students may be given an assignment to search for and select a subject for role play and support it with a scenario of communication for every member of a play. Almost all participants stress that by role-playing students learn to implement their communication strategy, practice behavioural patterns as well as language skills. From the psychological point of view, students overcome personal difficulties and deficiencies of communication. Furthermore, assessing the partners' speech behaviour helps students achieve the planned goals and prevent them from communication failures.

The second very important finding of the research can be formulated as follows: there has been a revolutionary change in teachers' mindset in assessing the role of the Internet and digital technologies in education process, particularly in teaching foreign languages. 100 per cent of teachers participating in the research have agreed that IT technologies suit modern learners and facilitate organizing and motivating activities of educators.

Most teachers of foreign languages highlight podcasts and WebQuests as useful tools for various reasons: they promote active learning practices and develop communicative competence. Moreover, podcasts provide authentic educational material which is available for every student at their gadgets. They provide increased applicability and portability. 99 percent of the respondents have testified that they use audio blogs, audio books, academic podcasts, interviews, news, radio shows. On the other hand, the respondents underline that educators should plan the work with podcasts and help student navigate the Internet by providing them with reliable and useful references to the resources and guide their work. The students (90 per cent) also mentioned that 'it is great to use their portable devices for educational purposes rather than entertainment'.

3.2 Developing professional skills

The research has demonstrated that Webquests can be used for developing professional skills. Webquest as a teaching model was presented by Bernie Dodge and Tom March at San Diego

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University 1995. This is ‘an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet, optionally supplemented with videoconferencing’ (Dodge, 1997). The form of using the Internet resources can assist students in gaining reliable information, expanding background knowledge, mastering critical thinking.

The respondents (78 per cent) argue that WebQuests are part of project-based learning which engages students and tutors in acquiring and brushing up knowledge and skills through an extended involvement in inquiry process with further critical processing and presenting the information. The implementation of the WebQuest method of active learning may promote mental processes which belong to Higher order thinking skills (Bloom, 1956) such as evaluation, synthesis, application and analysis. The teachers believe that in case this activity is structured in accordance with the professional needs, it can be very beneficial for developing professional skills, particularly in tourism, journalism, intercultural communication, public relations. The respondents (95 per cent) underline the benefits of this method in professional training. For instance, the students at the Kosygin State University of Russia actively participate in implementation of tourism and intercultural projects aimed at developing the tourism industry in Russia and developing new programs and routes for foreigners and natives to discover their Motherland. The students of the Institute of foreign languages at MAI University are engaged in comprising modern dictionaries of aviation and space terminology, participate in international conferences. Under the WebQuest method students are required to demonstrate skills of acquiring, processing, elaborating and summarizing the information with proper presentation it in a required form. It can vary from PowerPoint presentation and report to excursion and guided tour about Moscow or Voronezh or even work on an avia simulator.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the respondents involved in this research have accomplished a great deal of creative work. The research itself have prompted cooperation of educators, albeit the three universities, and promoted creation of collaborative atmosphere. It is evident that modern developments in the sphere of education require initiative and motivation; both educators and students should be encouraged to employ their life and academic experience.

The study has demonstrated the benefits of role-plays and panel discussions which stimulate students to perform real communication, express opinions and feelings. Motivated students work in a collaborative atmosphere: students may be divided into teams competing for better results in presenting their project, and they practice communication techniques of persuasion and argument when each member of the team is sharing responsibility for the team’s results. On the other hand, their partners learn to react accordingly. The research has demonstrated great interest of students in personalization of their stances and views which enables them to live and analyze collaboration under different social and professional conditions. At the same time the study has testified to a high level of student engagement and academic progress.

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