Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication [SCMC] as a Tool for Distant Teaching of Foreign Languages

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Abstract

The article aimed to analyze the methods and competency-based approaches to distance learning of a foreign language. The tasks are formulated to achieve the goal. They involve classifying the methods of foreign language teaching based on the competency approach and identifying the effective methods. The methodological basis of this research includes methods of analyzing the practical experience of foreign language teaching based on a competency-based approach, synthesis of national and international experience, comparison of national models of the language environment, and generalization of sociological data. As a result of the conducted research, it has been revealed that among various methods, approaches related to information and communication technologies [ICT] are utilized most often. The authors of the article believe that when teachers conduct courses using synchronous computer-mediated communication [SCMC] tools or platforms, students should be given opportunities to express their opinions. Most teachers recognize the creation of instructional videos as the most effective. According to the students, this type of activity also has the greatest learning effect and stimulates creativity. The scientific novelty of the research is the study of foreign language teaching methods based on a competency-based approach within the framework of online distance learning and the relationship of all interested parties, in other words, teachers, students, and educational institutions.

Keywords: foreign language, education, method, distance education, synchronous computer-mediated communication [SCMC], competency-based approach, tool, platform, instructional video, assessing, multi-literacy.

1.0. Introduction

Synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) offers second/foreign language (L2/FL) learners' interactional environments that are unique to face-to-face (F2F) communication. Such modes have the potential to facilitate better learning outcomes under certain conditions. The aim of this study was to compare the capacity of two online modes – text chat and voice chat – to promote uptake of targeted vocabulary in a foreign language classroom setting. Three distinct tasks (opinion exchange, dictogloss, problem-solving task) were used to measure the effectiveness of both modes to facilitate immediate and delayed uptake compared to F2F communication. The study investigated: (1) how task design and communication mode affected FL uptake; (2) the effect time allocation had; and (3) the degree to which task perceptions differed depending on communication mode. The effectiveness of the three modes and tasks was measured using a series of pre-tests and post-tests. Post-questionnaires and interviews were also conducted to gain insight into the participants' perceptions of the tasks. The investigation revealed both similarities and differences in the way SCMC and F2F communication affected learner uptake and demonstrated that certain task design features, such as input, time allocation, and goal orientation, can play a role in the effectiveness of text chat and voice chat to promote uptake in the FL classroom.

2.0. Literature Review

The transformation of foreign language teaching methods based on a competency-based approach within the framework of online distance learning has affected all interested parties, for example, teachers, students, and educational institutions. Therefore, the research on these relationships is scientifically significant. The research aim is to analyze the existing and most frequently used methods and competency-based approaches to teaching a foreign language remotely (online).

Combining creativity and new technologies in teaching and learning a foreign language achieves these tasks. The basis for the current research is the scientific work of specialists from different countries (Alipichev and Takanova, 2020; Baker, 2020; Almehlafi, 2021; Wang and Zou, 2021). It covers the issues of teaching foreign languages and the results of a survey of teachers and students of bachelor's and master's degrees (Bailey et al., 2021; Zubr and Sokolova, 2021). The analytical methods of this work include the study and analysis of the work of some Eurasian scientists and teachers (Marlina, 2018; Ogbonna et al., 2019; Hovhannisyan, 2022; McCallum, 2022). This choice is justified by methodological limitations, namely the use of relevant literature over the past 5 years in the field of effective methods of teaching a foreign language to university students in the framework of online distance learning, mainly in Europe and Asia. All literature is freely available (Springer Nature Switzerland AG.) and allows determining the development trends of foreign language online education today.

3.0. Language Programs for Distance Learning

When describing methods and approaches to learning foreign languages directly, it is crucial and relevant to evaluate the effectiveness of online learning. Active academic mobility in Eurasia is also supported by a great variety of language programs at all three stages of the Bologna process. According to the Masterportal.com portal, there are over 80,000 bachelor's programs in FL, 42,000 master's programs, 6,500 Ph.D. programs, and about 7,000 online degree programs in Europe (Balan, 2022). From 2014 to 2021, the number of FL bachelor's programs increased by 2.47 times. Simultaneously, language programs are equally available at state universities on a paid and budgetary basis. For international students from outside the EU jurisdiction, free language programs are available in Germany and Norway; in France, Austria, and Belgium, programs are available at a low cost of 200 to 3,000 euros per year (Balan, 2022). To study in language programs, students must submit diplomas of international exams confirming the level of language proficiency (Balan, 2022). The largest share of language programs is among educational programs in Switzerland (80%), the Netherlands (60%), Denmark (56%), Finland (55%), and Sweden (50%). The future of education is defined in the Open University (OU) innovative pedagogy report 2022 (Hulme, 2022). The goal of the research by Zubr and Sokolova (2021) is to present the survey questionnaire results, which focus on the experience of distance learning students. The questionnaire contains feedback from students regarding the distance learning form (distance mode) they have encountered. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Informatics and Management [FIM] at the University of Hradec Králové (Czech Republic). The interviewed students studied during the 2020/2021 academic year using distance learning. A total of 122 students took part in the study. The results show that FIM often uses online tools such as Microsoft Teams and BlackBoard. Students pointed out that the BlackBoard Learning Management System [LMS] is the most useful tool. In general, respondents are equally satisfied with distance learning and face-to-face training. The researchers emphasize that it is impossible to determine whether students prefer distance learning or full-time education (Zubr and Sokolova, 2021). The survey "Digital Learning at the Bashkir State University" (Bashkir State University) among 204 s-year bachelor students at the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year revealed that 84% of students prefer distance learning in a foreign language. In total, 95% of students always attend online classes and video conferences. The majority (80%) increased their level of motivation for distance learning (Akubekova and Kulyeva, 2021). We agree that it is difficult to say unequivocally that distance learning is 100% a priority. Our teaching experience shows that blended learning is the most effective method. The most interesting digital methods of learning foreign languages will be considered further.

4.0. Methods of Formation of Multi-Literacy

An interesting technique is the formation of multi-literacy. Multimodal writing positively impacts students' written competency, ability to cooperate, and motivation to learn. The study by Zhang et al. (2021), based on the theory of multi-literacy and the use of technology, is aimed at studying the influence of multimodal writing on vocabulary acquisition by language students. Seventy students were recruited, including 35 in the experimental group (EG) and 35 in the control group (CG). The selection criteria were teaching multimodal writing and language students mastering the FL vocabulary in tweet-based writing in the official WeChat account. The experimental group mastered the multimodality technique, and the control group mastered the traditional technique. After a 7-week experiment for EG, positive improvements were noted in the acquisition of vocabulary, especially in the use of the dictionary. There were no significant differences when comparing traditional writing and multimodal writing. Questionnaires and interviews about the perception and attitude of students toward writing tweets on the official account were conducted among 35 students in EG. Most students considered multimodal writing a pleasant and effective way to improve vocabulary acquisition (Zhang et al., 2021). The methodology of multi-literacy and teaching Russian as FL to Greek-speaking students has also been tested in European countries. As practice shows, the most preferable is the division of students into micro groups (3–4 students). According to the gender composition of micro groups, it is recommended to adhere to the proportions of 50:50 and 60:40 (Kholod, 2016). From 2016 until today, the dilemmas method has been applied during online foreign language classes in groups of pedagogical and historical faculties of Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University named after K. D. Ushinsky (Yaroslavl, Russia). On average, the method is used several times per semester. The parameters adopted for evaluating heuristic (sounding) speech in foreign practice were used during the control: accuracy, fluency (freedom), interaction with the communicant,

pronunciation, variety, and goal achievement. Compared with the control groups, where the method was not applied, the students of the considered groups showed an increase in fluency by 30%, a variety of language structures and an improvement in pronunciation – by 16%, accuracy – by 20%, and communication with a partner and achievement of a goal – by 25% (Kholod, 2018). At the Sibay Institute (branch) of Bashkir State University (Sibay, Russia), Bashkir State University (Ufa, Russia), and Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation (Moscow, Russia), the distance learning system is organized in the Moodle educational platform, which allows work effectively in tandem for both teachers and students. The system is accessible; it is designed for different levels of learners. Marinina emphasizes, "Providing access to the platform and its content from any remote point of the country and the world is another of its absolute advantages compared to traditional teaching methods" (Marinina and Kruchinkina, 2020). The teaching staff develops their own electronic courses with theoretical and practical material on multi-literacy and tests based on the approved DWP (disciplines work programs). The Sibay Institute (branch) of Bashkir State University, Bashkir State University, and Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation offer a large set of interactive elements for the formation of foreign language multi-literacy: forums, glossaries, chats, blogs, video conference.

5.0. The Use of SCMC in Teaching Pronunciation

Distance learning is especially present in language teaching. A lot of research has been conducted on computer-assisted language learning (CALL), a field of study in which computer-assisted pronunciation training (CAPT) has its own line of work. Online tools, applications, and automatic speech recognition (ASR) devices are some of the multiple mechanisms that help language learners improve their pronunciation, which encourage autonomous learning through fast feedback (Nguyen, 2020). Hence, they become interesting tools to support students' acquisition of second language pronunciation. Nevertheless, using these devices and other teaching techniques effectively in class needs further study.

Practicing pronunciation when learning a second language is not always an easy task in F2F lectures, nor in online sessions. Pronunciation improvement takes time, and needs close feedback and constant practice. Therefore, it is important that online instructors search the right mechanisms to implement CAPT in their lectures. In spite of the fact that nowadays there are many free and user-friendly tools to teach pronunciation online (Krishnan, 2020), practitioners have to teach students how to use them and the purpose for which these should be applied, constantly accompanying students throughout their learning progress. Otherwise, learners might get lost and demotivated. This becomes especially important when teaching undergraduates that used to take courses in person. Despite being digital natives, university students who experienced online learning during lockdown were not "trained" to study from home through a computer. Consequently, learning how to transcribe on a laptop, or practice segmental and suprasegmental features through a screen are complex skills to assimilate in limited time. In this case, close interaction between the teacher and the learner becomes crucial.

The use of SCMC in online pronunciation teaching could fill the virtual gap. There are many ways to communicate synchronously with students – video-conferencing, instant messages, or chat rooms are just a few (Nguyen, 2020). By using some of these tools, teachers encourage active participation and collaborative learning, creating a social context that is beneficial for language acquisition. In fact, SCMC can somehow simulate F2F lectures, being able to alleviate the students' stress caused by the new setting.

Some recent studies support the use of SCMC in pronunciation teaching. Zeinali Nejad et al. (2021) conducted a quasi-experimental study with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) medicine undergraduates at the University of Kerman, Iran. Students were divided into two groups: One group took classes synchronously via video-calls, while the other took them asynchronously through voice messages and emails. Students took a written pronunciation pre and a posttest and participated in a semi-structured interview. Results not only revealed a positive effect on students' pronunciation when using CMC, but also a greater improvement for the synchronous group. In another study, Zeinali Nejad et al. (2021) examined forty-five female Persian learners of English who took a test on phonemic discrimination and lexical stress. Three groups were created according to the means by which they received instruction: F2F (control group), ACMC, and SCMC. Again, both experimental groups performed better than the control group, and the SCMC group showed more signs of improvement. Thus, SCMC seems to be beneficial for pronunciation learning even though more research needs to be conducted.

6.0. Conclusions

The distance learning system is developing intensively all over the world due to its integration ability. In order to effectively organize the educational process when teaching foreign languages remotely in the context of a pandemic, special technical, psychological, and pedagogical training is required to switch to this form of education. Thus, it is necessary to study the current state of distance learning in foreign languages, both in Uzbekistan and abroad, and analyze

the prospects for the development of this form of education, taking into account factors that have a positive impact on the process of learning a foreign language. Learning a foreign language only in remote mode should be limited, since many aspects of learning a foreign language are more effectively worked out in "live" contact. Therefore, in order for distance learning to be successfully implemented in the educational process, the society must be prepared for the transition to this form of education, both technically, psychologically, and pedagogically. And in this process, a special responsibility lies on the state's activities in this matter.

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