

A LOOK INTO THE ROLE OF ICT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

The article presents the experience of a group of teachers of Bulgarian language for foreigners from MU - Plovdiv in the application of ICT in distance learning in an online environment. The authors share some problems in connection with the forced suspension of classroom teaching in the Bulgarian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The subject of the study is the training of future doctors to communicate effectively when entering their clinical rotation programs. Emphasis is placed on the advantages of PowerPoint presentations when teaching vocabulary and grammar as well as on the priority of digital learning materials in the field of language studies when adapting to distance learning. The conclusions are supported through examples from the practice of the authors. The presentation of new lexical items in the online classes is described. Examples of specific tasks with results achieved through them are given. The usefulness of the appropriate choice of topics and "entering roles" to motivate learners is commented on.

Keywords: ICT, foreign language learning, medicine, distance learning

Rezumat

În articol, este descrisă experiența unui grup de profesori de limbă bulgară pentru străini ai Universității de Medicină din Plovdiv, cu privire la utilizarea TIC-urilor în învățământul la distanță și cel digital. Autoarele prezintă și unele probleme legate de suspendarea învățământului în sălile de studii ale universităților bulgare în timpul pandemiei cauzate de COVID-19. Cercetarea poartă asupra formării viitorilor medici, capabili să comunice eficient atunci când intră în programele lor de rotație clinică. Accentul se pune pe avantajele utilizării prezentărilor PowerPoint în predarea vocabularului și gramaticii, precum și pe prioritatea materialelor de învățare în format digital, compuse pentru domeniul studiilor lingvistice în învățarea la distanță. Concluziile sunt susținute prin exemple din practica autorilor. Este descrisă prezentarea de noi articole lexicale în clasele online. Sunt prezentate exemple de sarcini specifice cu rezultate obținute prin intermediul acestora. Se comentează utilitatea alegerii corespunzătoare a subiectelor și a "intrării în roluri" pentru a motiva cursanții.

Cuvinte-cheie: TIC, învățarea limbii străine, medicină, învățarea la distanță

Only ten years ago, we, the professors from the Medical University - Plovdiv, switched from chalk to whiteboards and only 4-5 years ago we got

the opportunity to include information and communication technologies (ICT) in our work. Looking back, we can see the long way to go: from the blackboard and chalk to the computer keyboard, from visiting various places for educational purposes to the computer image, from live reading to audio recording, from methodology without language mediator to its systematic use in our teaching activity. The change in the curricula of our university, as well as the admission of mainly foreign students who study in English, led to discrepancies between the learning activities used in the last years and the tasks set by the new curricula. Naturally, there was a need for significant changes and reorganisation of our work.

In 2016, we started working on a learning system that combines elements of traditional and communicative teaching methods. The idea of creating such a system was provoked by the need to optimize the language training of students who do not speak Bulgarian and study medicine in English. The intention is to prepare students for communication in the Bulgarian language environment with patients and medical staff who do not speak English. The task is to introduce the trainees to the basic medical vocabulary and grammar of the Bulgarian language, necessary for a dialogue to establish the status of the patient and his complaints, to conduct a clinical examination, i.e. communication in order to take a medical history and diagnose, as well as for giving instructions for treatment, recommendations for lifestyle, etc. This prepares future physicians for successful communication when entering clinical disciplines in their academic program.

When we started working on the textbook, we clearly defined the methodology - training in a real learning environment with a teacher and using computer equipment and a screen. For this reason, we organized the learning content in two forms:

- electronic media (CD with PowerPoint presentations, including illustrations, explanations and translation of the new vocabulary, grammar units to the relevant lesson and a set of oral exercises, and audio recordings of dialogues for listening and tasks to them).

- a book body (dialogues, texts, illustrative material, oral and written exercises; an appendix - grammatical summaries, the listening texts to the audio recordings and the answers to the tasks to them; a dictionary; synonyms and antonyms.)

We were guided by the understanding that “the development of digitized learning materials provides an opportunity for learners in the form of independent work to upgrade their knowledge and develop skills in the field of the target language. The transformation of the pedagogical triangle teacher-student-knowledge into a quadrilateral with the entry of ICT in the process of teaching and learning requires active participation of the

teacher/lecturer in feeding the activity of the learners with additional learning forms” (Shipchanov, p. 123).

In 2018 we published the textbook *Bulgarian language for foreigners. Specialised textbook for medics*. In the next two years we had the opportunity to work with the textbook, to present multimedia presentations on screens in the classrooms, to use audio recordings, but we also relied on the traditional forms. The emphasis was still on the two elements of the pedagogical relationship – teacher and content, and was not focused on the learner. The trainees did not go beyond the passive receptive role; they rarely chose and transformed information. Only a small number of them hypothesised and made decisions based on a certain cognitive structure.

The forced cessation of classes during the Covid-19 pandemic last year challenged us to step out of the comfort of our familiar traditional learning and replace face-to-face teaching with distance learning in an online environment without any prior preparation. However, such training requires a rethinking of teaching methods and strategies, organisational and cultural adaptation and a change in the strategies for creating real educational and training projects. The teaching and learning of Bulgarian as a foreign language is one of the most difficult to organize online training processes because of the specificity of the subject and the methodology of teaching. A characteristic of the discipline "foreign language" in principle is that the goal is not only the acquisition of language competence, but also the acquisition of communicative competence. Within the distance work there are difficulties in creating conditions for conducting reflective and communicative learning. On the one hand, Bulgarian as a foreign language is not a theoretical discipline, so the direct transfer of its teaching and learning in a distance format was impossible. On the other hand, distance learning, with all the complexity of its organization, had to retain all the traditional components inherent in the educational process (goals, content, methods, organizational forms of student work, teaching aids). It was necessary to improvise quickly, in many universities without guaranteed or appropriate infrastructural support.

In 2018, the Medical University - Plovdiv engaged with Telelink Business Services (TBS) start its transformation, deploying a Moodle-based learning management system hosted on Microsoft Azure and integrated with Microsoft 365. The main goal was to enhance the learning experience and create a platform for both exams and educational content that could autoscale to meet demand. The deployment of Moodle on Azure and its integration with Microsoft 365 tools – including Teams, SharePoint, Forms – has enabled the university to provide both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration among employees, lecturers, and students, a key capability during the current COVID-19 pandemic. While many other organizations

have struggled, the university managed to quickly shift to online classes and keep its community connected. Even more, we conducted synchronous online tutoring. The virtual classrooms largely allowed us to get closer to the real conditions in the classroom. Office365 allows the use of Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint, OneNote, Access, and many other applications, which significantly facilitate our work. However, as non-expert online teachers, we had to focus on the resources we would use anyway to teach the content of our course face-to-face and adapt it for distance learning purposes.

When building a distance lesson, various factors must be taken into account - effective interaction between teacher and student despite the physical distance; use of various educational technologies (online lessons combine video, audio, images and text); effectiveness of teaching materials and teaching methods; feedback efficiency.

We had a ready-made product, which, although created for another purpose, largely met the needs of distance learning. The division of the language system *Bulgarian language for foreigners (A specialized textbook for physicians)* on paper and electronic media proved to be very suitable for adapting the curriculum to the capabilities of the selected platform. Thus, we were able to provide our students with various opportunities for learning through PowerPoint presentations with dialogues and text, grammar summaries in tabular form, exercises for composing microdialogues on the model and illustrated situations, audio recordings to each of the topics. And all this available in the platform, allowing for self-preparation and repetition according to individual needs. Setting individual tasks was facilitated.

We used the book body in PDF format, shared via the SharePoint system. Thus, students had constant access to the textbook and could work with it both during synchronous online classes and asynchronously - in self-preparation and in performing group or personal tasks. The separation of selected written exercises from the book body into Word files, set as an independent work in the Assignments application, facilitated the placement and verification of individual and group tasks. PowerPoint presentations were uploaded to Class materials in Teams. This storage space allows access to the materials to everyone with valid institutional account. The fact that we had ready-made multimedia presentations, to some extent, managed to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication, especially in the presentation and explanation of the new vocabulary and grammar.

One of the challenges for language teachers in online learning is teaching new vocabulary. Undoubtedly, vocabulary is crucial for students' language development and communication skills, and the best way to help students memorise new words is to connect them to a real-world object. When we are in the classrooms, we show real objects, we use sounds, smells and tastes,

we illustrate through facial expressions, gestures and movements, we act out situations. When we are in front of computer screens, this way of introducing new vocabulary is not very effective. The included rich illustrative material and Flash animation in our ready-made presentations made the presentation of new lexical items in the online classes easy and accessible. The presentation begins with the introduction of new words on individual slides and the phonetic features of these words. The appearance of the image is simultaneous with the pronunciation of the word by the teacher. This allows the perception of the graphic image in parallel with its sound equivalent to facilitate learning. Then the lexical unit is written in Bulgarian. This way of explaining the vocabulary makes it possible to take into account the individual characteristics of each student - both those who have more developed auditory memory and those who have a predominant visual memory. The meaning of each lexical item is then revealed (mostly by English translation) and examples of its use in phrases or sentences are given. The most common way of semantising vocabulary - demonstrating only the relevant picture - is used less frequently in our presentations, mainly in those cases where words denoting specific objects are studied.

In a similar way, but without translation, we present grammar. Here the organisation, layout and the way of presenting the information proved to be especially valuable - through pre-set animation the teacher is able to control the moment of showing the individual elements of the slide, respectively the individual parts of the grammatical explanations, to emphasise the most important ones, to pause the presentation for insertion of additional explanations, to return to the previous slide. These capabilities of PowerPoint presentations somewhat replace the lack of a whiteboard. The tools of the online platform allow us to work with the audio files available in the electronic medium of the textbook. Listening to the audio recordings is not affected by interference in the Internet connection, and its multiplicity is not limited.

Surprisingly, the lack of "live" communication can have some advantages. It turns out that the absence of familiar supports; hints (e.g. sign, facial expressions) from the physical world can be a motive for correct pronunciation, for more careful structuring of the presentation. When studying the parts of the human body, the natural reaction of the speaker is to point or touch the part he is talking about, thus relying on to confirm the verbal information. In the same way, his listeners are not helped to understand. This requires compensating for traditional approaches with others, complementing visual approaches with sound approaches, searching for synonyms or descriptive explanation.

I set my students the task: *Imagine that you are an astronaut who has just landed on an unknown planet. When you get off your spaceship, you are met by*

aliens on the planet. Use these names of parts of the human body and suitable adjectives and describe how the anatomy of aliens differs from human anatomy inside and out. Use the verbs: to be, to have. The students not only offered original images. Their interest in the topic motivates them to try to find mistakes, their own or others', when using different grammatical categories (eg. plural or numerical form of masculine nouns, articulated or inarticulate form of nouns), when forming of adjectives from nouns (eg. choice of morpheme, phonetic changes, coordination of the adjective with the noun), when using words that are exceptions in the genus of nouns, etc. In this exercise, the task was not only to construct an exposition and description of an object, but also to listen with understanding and ask questions.

Another interesting interactive task was to conduct an impromptu doctor-patient dialogue in which the learner played one role and the teacher the other. Preliminary information was the only disease the patient was suffering from. The dialogue was preceded by a PowerPoint presentation prepared by the student and presented to the group in one of the previous classes. The purpose of the dialogue was for the student to take a history by asking the right questions and writing down the necessary information. The students were warned that they would be required to turn on the cameras and that a video of the dialogue would be made. This motivates them to prepare, to seek information about the disease, to prepare appropriate questions.

Another challenge for language teachers in online learning is the lack of new types of textbooks and additional sources of information and practice not only usable in the classroom, but also in the time for self-preparation. A successful attempt to fill this gap in teaching Latin is the text book *Tests for practice in class and self-preparation in Latin and specialized terminology for students of "Medicine", "Dental Medicine" and "Pharmacy" (English program)*, published in 2020. The same text book by the same author is available for Bulgarian students of "Medicine", "Dental Medicine", "Pharmacy", "Nurse" and "Nurse-Midwife".

The topic "Latin and specialized terminology" is presented from a new and modern point of view, and the preparation of students for the exam is supported by the rich study material included in closed-ended questions. Such a textbook would be useful in teaching Bulgarian.

Online learning is different, but not worse than face-to-face teaching. In fact, in many cases there are advantages. But it requires different rules and a new set of skills. Just because we teach on a webcam doesn't mean we can't make teaching interactive, fun or live.

The extraordinary situation during the Covid-19 pandemic last year caused the acceleration of the processes of ICT entry into education and showed us that the direction is right. We also realised that it is not enough to simply provide e-learning materials to learners; it is necessary to develop

new types of tasks and apply innovative techniques to increase the effectiveness of distance learning.

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