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Problems of Using MOOCs for Teaching Foreign Language to University Students

This article explores the problems that foreign language teachers may face when teaching a professionally oriented foreign language to university students using massive open online courses. The current state of the educational environment dictates the requirements for the use of digital technologies in the educational process of higher education institutions. Based on many years of experience on integrating massive open online courses into the process of teaching a foreign language in non-linguistic universities in Novosibirsk, the problems that impede the increase of students' motivation for cognitive activity and the effective formation of professional foreign language competence are formulated. This paper presents a number of methodological recommendations to neutralize the impact of the given problems on the target learning objectives.

Keywords: massive open online course, blended learning, distance learning, open education, university.

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Проблемы использования МООК для обучения иностранному языку студентов вуза

Данная статья рассматривает проблемы, с которыми могут столкнуться преподаватели иностранных языков при обучении профессионально-ориентированному иностранному языку студентов вуза с использованием массовых открытых онлайн-курсов. Современное состояние образовательной среды диктует требования к использованию цифровых технологий в учебном процессе высшей школы. На основе многолетнего опыта интеграции массовых открытых онлайн-курсов в процесс обучения иностранному языку в неязыковых вузах Новосибирска, формулируются проблемы, препятствующие повышению мотивации студентов к когнитивной деятельности и эффективному формированию профессиональной иноязычной компетенции. Автором предложен ряд методических рекомендаций для минимизации влияния описанных проблем на заявленные цели обучения.

Ключевые слова: массовый открытый онлайн-курс, смешанное обучение, дистанционное обучение, открытое образование, университет.

I n the period of digitalization of society, the use of digital technologies in university educational practice to intensify the learning process, increase students' motivation for cognitive activity is an urgent area of higher education pedagogy and adult learning methods. Unfortunately, it should be noted that foreign language university training in most cases proceeds in an artificial way, because most of the students do not experience the need to interact in a foreign language. This phenomenon is especially expressed at the regional level.

The use of digital technologies in teaching foreign languages is reflected in the research of M.A. Bovtenko [17, 440], S.V. Titova [14, 64; 15, 150], P.V. Sysoev [13, 4], M.A. Morozova [10, 94], E.P. Kobeleva [8, 30], A.D. Zubkov [5, 97], O.A. Kiryakova [7, 121], N.E. Bulankina, N.N. Malak-hova, O.V. Mishutina O. [21] and others; psychological aspects of using digital technologies in teaching and learning are considered in the works of M.S. Yanitskiy [16, 42], T.A. Vorobyova [3, 100] and other scientists.

Many years of experience in teaching a foreign language for specific purposes by teachers of NSUEM, STU and NSTU [6, 127] allow us to conclude that during the academic year students' attitude to the learning process can change both negatively and positively. There is a direct connection between these changes and teaching philosophy. Routine use of such tasks from a single textbook weakens positive impression of the educational process and learners become less motivated to cognitive activity. To avoid this, today many high school teachers use digital technologies in the implementation of foreign language

training for students [18, 70]. However, these actions often do not provide a more effective formation of professional foreign language competence. This can be explained by some reasons — low digital literacy of teachers, the absence or non-compliance with the methodology for integrating digital technologies into the process of teaching a foreign language at a university, or the complexity of the actions required. The relevance of the study is determined by the need to increase the motivation for learning a foreign language by university students, as well as to improve the quality of foreign language training at the level of higher education. This study offers to examine the problems of using digital technologies for teaching a foreign language at university in relation to solving the problems mentioned above.

MOOCs are open educational resources on the Internet from internationally recognized educational and scientific organizations. Due to the phenomenon of mass character, most online courses are developed in English, which is one of the reasons for their integration into the process of teaching a professionally oriented foreign language [11, 391, 12, 8; 21]. Numerous studies of scientists are devoted to the study of the phenomenon of MOOCs in university education and reflect such problems as: a small proportion of students completing their studies [1, 50], compliance with federal state educational standards [2, 92], problems of recognizing the results of MOOC learning and obtaiing credits based on learning outcomes [4, 129], concerns related to the fact that MOOCs can partially or completely replace traditional forms of education [9, 66]. However, exiguous attention has been paid to the problems and difficulties associated with the use of MOOCs for teaching a foreign language. The novelty of the research and, at the same time, its goal is to identify the problems that arise when integrating MOOCs into the process of teaching a foreign language to university students.

Previous studies of the author [19, 184; 20, 542] are devoted to the research of the linguistic and methodological potential of MOOCs, as well as the development and implementation of a methodological model for the formation of professional foreign language competence using MOOCs in blended learning environment. In general, this model includes the choice of an online course, the preliminary completion of it by a teacher, the development of language support tasks, the independent study of MOOC materials by students, classroom tutoring for students experiencing language and content difficulties, the completion of a MOOC and obtaining a certificate, face-to-face defense of the course project in the classroom. Long-term experience of using MOOCs in teaching foreign languages to students of NSTU, NSUEUM and STU allows to identify and generalize the following problems that have arisen during the implementation of the model developed.

Increased preparation intensity. Compared to traditional teaching methods (lecture, seminar, work with an educational and methodical complex, e-learning), learning using MOOCs is more time consuming. A teacher must make a selection of educational material — choose one MOOC or a specialization consisting of several online courses. Further, the teacher independently completes the MOOC in order to have a degree of expertise in the content issues studied by the students. After that, it is necessary to develop language support tasks in order to make it easier for students to study MOOC materials and make the formation of professional foreign language competence more effective. In terms of time costs, this approach loses to traditional work with a textbook.

Multidirectional activities of students. In addition to traditional universal educational activities in a language classroom (reading, translation, communication, learning the rules, working with a professional vocabulary and writing essays), students are required to register on the platform, master the interface of the MOOC platform, write a motivation letter in order to have all course sections available for learning free of charge (without a motivation letter on the Coursera platform, test and examinations are not available, which does not provide an opportunity to receive a certificate of completion of the course). These actions often cause difficulties for students due to the fact that they are doing it for the first time.

Massive character. This problem can be encountered at the stage of selecting MOOCs for integration into the educational process. Due to the targeted focus of these online courses at a wide audience of listeners, MOOCs often contain the basics of a discipline, materials studied during 1 and 2 years of university studies or even teaching materials for secondary school students. Often the title of an online course contains the words "Foundations of …", "Basics of …", "Introduction to …", "Principles of …", "Theory of …" which complicates the selection of MOOCs if a teacher works with students of 3 and 4 years of study, graduate and postgraduate students. For the same reason, language MOOCs are aimed at learners with a CEFR level up to B2, and there are far fewer open courses for advanced learners. Courses are developed mainly in English in order to reach the maximum number of potential learners, which imposes restrictions on university teachers of German, French and Chinese languages regarding the possibility of using MOOCs in the practice of teaching their discipline to students.

Basic focus. Traditionally, the content of massive open online courses correlates with the traditional classical disciplines of various sciences. However, the following issue was revealed. While selecting MOOCs for professionally-oriented teaching of a foreign language to students majoring in "Customs", it was found that professional open online courses on the study of customs payments, customs law, organization of foreign trade operations, etc. are poorly represented on various MOOC platforms. Such a weak representation of customs MOOCs is an obstacle to the use of the proposed methodological model in transport universities.

Focus on professional discipline. Although learning a foreign language using MOOCs occurs according to the concept of content and language integrated learning, which in turn leads to the simultaneous development of professional skills, skills in foreign and native languages, it requires a profound knowledge of non-philological disciplines from the teacher of foreign languages, which imposes its own restrictions on the use of such model, because often the subject competence of foreign language teachers does not go beyond teaching a language for specific purposes, and therefore the departments of foreign languages at universities are poorly saturated with human resources to implement a model of teaching a foreign language using MOOCs.

Low level of students` foreign language competence. The concept of using MOOCs for teaching a foreign language at university is primarily aimed at educational work with students of non-linguistic specializations. Traditionally, in the universities of the Russian Federation (especially at the regional level), students majoring in economics, engineering, medicine etc., have poorly developed language skills, and, therefore, they are often unable to master the language material offered to them according to the concept of using MOOCs for teaching a foreign language, or the language teacher is expected to do significant prework to prepare students for further work with MOOCs.

Weak feedback. Due to the fact that the number of students enrolling for an online course is enormously high, it is physically impossible for teachers and tutors of an online course to provide feedback to all students. The evaluation functions are mainly transferred to computers, as well as to the peers — to all MOOC participants. On rare occasions, such as completing a specialization from several online courses, the MOOC teachers and tutors evaluate the portfolios themselves and provide students with clear recommendations for improving their creative works.

Lack of speaking. Teaching a foreign language is based on teaching the types of speech activity — listening, writing, reading and speaking. For the first three, students can develop skills in these activities through independent study of MOOC materials. Considering MOOCs regarding the formation of speaking skills, it can be noted that students can study theoretical materials about public speaking, pronunciation, the pedagogical design of MOOCs can stimulate them to record a video where they practice their ability to produce monologs, but in response to their oral speech they can only receive written feedback from fellow students and, in rare cases, from teachers; there is no opportunity to practice dialogical speech.

Courses developed by non-native speakers. Many leading European, Asian and Pacific educational and scientific organizations develop MOOCs in English, and often the teachers who recorded the video lectures are not native English speakers, and, therefore, produce foreign language with an accent, which can lead to misconceptions about the sound of a foreign language among students who were offered with, for example, MOOCs in English, developed by teachers of one of the universities in Spain.

Academic dishonesty. Since the discussed concept of teaching a foreign language to university students with the usage of MOOCs in a foreign language assumes blended learning, when students study the majority of educational materials outside the classroom independently, there is a possibility of cheating when answering test questions, as well as the possibility of uploading identical written works within a group of students. However, Coursera's code of honor warns students about the possible blocking of access to platform materials in the case of cheating and plagiarism.

Silent students. Despite the fact that pedagogical design of MOOCs and teachers in their video lectures constantly stimulate students to visit an online forum, communicate with each other there, ask questions and comment on learning materials, most students will prefer to be silent and complete only the minimum required part of educational tasks, that are sufficient to bring them a certificate of completion of the MOOC.

Taking into account the above problems of using MOOCs for teaching a professionally-oriented foreign language to university students, this study provides methodological recommendations aimed at minimizing the impact of these difficulties on the effectiveness of the formation of professional foreign language competence and motivation for cognitive activity:

1) to optimize the time spent on the preparatory stage by joint work of several teachers on the implementation of the concept, introduce basic MOOCs that can be used by as many teachers and students as possible;

2) to supervise the educational process in the format of a language laboratory at the initial stage of working with the MOOC platform and educational materials;

3) to intensify the process of selecting MOOCs when working with students of 3 and 4 years of study, as well as graduate and postgraduate students by using all existing MOOC platforms, MOOC aggregators; do not ignore small private online courses (SPOCs);

4) to engage foreign language teachers with additional qualifications in the field of the MOOC studied to use the model, cooperate with teachers of professional departments in relation to consulting on the subject content of MOOCs;

5) to track the required input level of language skills expected from students when studying MOOC materials (usually it is indicated in the description on the start page of the course);

6) to ask students for their written works and provide them with feedback in the classroom, conduct classroom public defense of the project after the completion of the MOOC;

7) to develop speaking skills in the audience when discussing MOOC materials in the format of round tables, brainstorming, etc.;

8) to use courses only from native speakers of the target language, allow the use of inauthentic materials only if MOOCs in the target language are not presented on the MOOC environment;

9) to systematically conduct classes in the language laboratory in the presence of a teacher, introduce a system of point-rating penalties when facts of cheating and plagiarism are detected;

10) to require students to create screenshots confirming their participation in forum discussions.

Following the methodological recommendations can help smooth out the negative impact of the problems described and thereby intensify the process of foreign language training and increase the motivation of students of a non-linguistic university to cognitive activity in foreign language classes.

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