Teaching a foreign language to students of non-linguistic departments in the Eurasian environment during the pandemic

Oxana V. Kozina[1]

Olga V. Miasnikova[2*]

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[1]Altai State Pedagogical University, Barnaul, Russia
[2] Altai State University, Barnaul, Russia
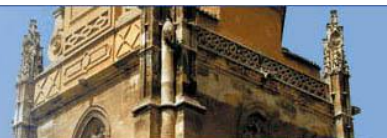
Teaching a foreign language to students of non-linguistic departments in the Eurasian environment during the pandemic

Oxana V. Kozina[1], Olga V. Miasnikova[2*]
[1]Altai State Pedagogical University, Barnaul, Russia
[2] Altai State University, Barnaul, Russia
*Corresponding Author
Email:cck2004@mail.ru[1], omelnikova2000@mail.ru[2]

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the specifics of teaching a foreign language to students of non-linguistic departments in the Eurasian environment during the pandemic. There were described resource opportunities of internet technologies in teaching a foreign language to students of non-linguistic departments, including a wide range of teaching materials. Moreover, these opportunities have a motivational potential if students are given competent guidance in methodic, didactic, and technical aspects in online learning. The aim to elicit difficulties, which non-linguistic students have to face in distant learning of foreign language during the pandemic, encouraged the authors to develop a questionnaire based on the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference. This survey enabled the authors to arrive at conclusions that correlate with other researchers' works, which allows them to determine general trends and consider them while planning their own educational products in the future. The research was conducted in the MOODLE electronic system. The authors assume that the above-mentioned electronic system is the most widespread in the Eurasian Educational Space and an efficient tool of online teaching. The specifics of the foreign language course, where the language is both a target and a means of non-linguistic learning, were determined. Basic kinds of speech activity were characterized. Moreover, ways to organize these activities with the help of internet technologies in learning were identified to facilitate overcoming certain difficulties in completing the academic course in a foreign language by non-linguistic students in distance format. It was proved that the elaboration of methodic, didactic, and technical components of distant education in teaching a foreign language to non-linguistic students during the pandemic can make distant learning an effective form of education. Thus, we underlined the practicability of introducing internet technologies in the educational process in higher educational institutions.

Keywords: Students of non-linguistic departments, educational process, foreign languages, effective form of education, electronic learning environment

INTRODUCTION

Today, there are many research papers on the pandemic in the world community. The educational environment is not an exception. Humanity has witnessed global changes in the format of learning, a shift in educational guidelines, a renewal of teaching principles and a search for new teaching techniques. The requirements of the time do not only presuppose a mere awareness of foreign languages teaching methodology and efficient planning concerning the curriculum but also, as E. Nechaeva (2017) noted, provide "high proficiency in modern digital media, which ensure a new format of lessons."

Recently, many papers have been written by Russian scientists on the problems of using internet technologies when teaching a foreign language in non-linguistic higher educational institutions and their methodic and didactic potential. In this connection, such authors as T. N. Zatsepina (2016) and T. A. Syrina (2016) came to a unanimous opinion that the rapid development of information and communications technology [ICT] has caused the necessity to develop and introduce electronic systems into the educational process. The scholars also noted that using computer technologies increases the level of teaching in general.

Traditional education methods are replaced or updated by new kinds of activities, such as using information educational technologies and online content. Today's education has a mostly mixed character, which allows being partly engaged and simultaneously developing several kinds of activity, both in practical and theoretical aspects. The matter of hybrid education implementation is raised in the works of such foreign researchers as T. George (2021), A. Shorten, J. Smith (2017), and others. Blended learning combines face-to-face teaching with

various online resources and innovative practices focused on the students. According to numerous Russian and international studies, blended or hybrid learning has been acknowledged as the most effective method. Such education enables students to develop critical thinking, ICT skills, and teamwork skills, thus, transforming them from mere "receivers" of knowledge into active participants of the learning process. The hybrid technology combines the advantages of in-person and distant learning. Nowadays, this format is growing fast in such areas of education, where the priorities are, above all, teacher-student face-to-face contact, socialization, and live communication. A foreign language holds a unique place in the teaching process. Once I.A. Zimnyaya (1991) observed, "a foreign language is a target and a means of learning at the same time."

The specific character of non-linguistic education is attributable to the fact that the language is not considered to be a means and a target but, to a greater degree, a goal. A language is treated as a subject that needs to be studied, like physics, mathematics, chemistry, or other disciplines. A student renders all knowledge in other subjects in their mother tongue, already included in their subject activity. However, the situation is different with learning a foreign language because the information about the language (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and country-studying facts) should be acquired in the subject's language. Thus, a foreign language is simultaneously a target and a means of education. Therefore, a teacher of non-linguistic departments aims to integrate students into the language environment of this or that professional occupation.

This paper analyzes the period of work with students of non-linguistic departments who had to learn online due to the unfavorable epidemiological situation. The pandemic has turned out to be a real challenge for the entire community in terms of teachers' readiness to change their style of professional thinking completely, transfer to new conditions of the learning environment, review their milestones in teaching, and establish the most efficient system of teaching. The current situation in education has boosted the transition process to the hybrid reality, which has revealed the insufficiency of traditional forms of teaching. To this end, teachers must master new online technologies to combine online and offline education correctly and rationally and include various online elements in their teaching practice because today's educational process is irrelevant without information technologies. In our opinion, the research on the reorganization of the educational process is urgent to today's reality.

Teaching a foreign language in a non-linguistic higher educational institution is challenging for teachers and students. Among the complicating factors of distant learning, one can note the low language competence of non-linguistic students, a limited number of academic hours for this course, and students' low motivation.

To make the learning process more efficient and implement learner-centered and differentiated approaches during the pandemic, Altai State University and Altai State Pedagogical University offer to use "Moodle" electronic educational environment with a wide range of resource opportunities. Consequently, using this environment while teaching a foreign language in a non-linguistic higher educational institution modernizes the organization of the learning process, which gives students access to an extended bank of teaching materials, raising motivation to learn the subject and promoting an effective interaction among all participants of the learning process.

The necessity to elicit problems that may appear in the transition mentioned above requires examining the issue of teaching a foreign language online.

A foreign language is a part of language culture and the core part of speech activity. The main kinds of speech activity are speaking, listening, reading, and writing. E. A. Mazentseva (2015) stated, "Every kind of speech activity has its own implementation; speaking determines the professional performance of a lecturer, writing determines the professional performance of a writer. In these instances, speech activity serves as an independent professionally fixed human activity." When teaching non-linguistic students, speech acts as an intermediary agent for implementing a particular speaking intention. Professional performance may be connected with activities other than speech. At the same time, the curriculum envisages teaching all kinds of speech activity that are considered to be the main ones in the verbal communication between people.

Verbal communication is an interaction between people carried out via different kinds of speech activity by means of verbal (language) tools.

The nature of speech activity is diverse; some types help implement oral communication, and others involve written communication. The former include speaking and listening. Reading and writing are complex kinds of speech activity, which require special target-oriented teaching. These kinds of speech activity implement a written message mediated by time and distance; teaching them in a foreign language is a separate complicated task, which can be facilitated using interrelated teaching.

The goal in teaching reading is to enable students to master the skills of extensive and intensive reading, skimming, and scanning. The sphere of speaking envisages teaching an ability to give short and full answers to all types of questions and ask questions about a text. Students should be able to build a situational utterance on the topic of the text, a familiar text, or a combination of a minimum of two texts using an outline. Teaching the writing aspect of the language aims to enable students to write down an orally delivered report, particularly the vocabulary, construct correct sentences, and make concise and extended outlines of different forms for a text given for reading. The factors mentioned above are the main macro goals of teaching a foreign language.

As already mentioned, the pandemic has broadened the teaching borders, and teachers have turned to hybrid learning. The Eurasian educational environment has seen the formation of a flexible system of teaching based mainly on online platforms. In this regard, I. G. Makarewitsch (2002) asserted the following.

Thanks to internet technologies, the development of different kinds of speech activity are accompanied by mastering the following skills:

- Listening skills based on authentic recordings from the internet;
- Monologic and dialogic communication skills based on a problem discussion of the internet content presented by the teacher or a groupmate;
- Writing skills based on individual written responses to partners, reports, compositions, and other types of epistolary products of joint activity (Makarewitsch, 2002).

Also, E. S. Polat (2001) distinguished other opportunities of internet technologies in the process of education:

- Authentic materials for reading on the topic under study;
- Audio recordings (politicians' speeches, interesting talks on various topics given by native speakers, and students' oral presentations);
- Oral discussions of letters and messages received via e-mail or social networks;
- Discussion on a particular problem obtained from the internet (news items, articles);
- Analysis of messages, oral and written utterances of native speakers, including phraseology, realia, idioms, proverbs, sayings, and neologisms reflecting the specific functioning of the target language in the culture of the people;
- Original fiction stories obtained from virtual libraries;
- Electronic grammar references, vocabulary books, dictionaries, and books on country-studies (Polat, 2001).

The process of teaching a foreign language online to non-linguistic students should be organized in such a way that students do all kinds of activities independently and are subsequently assessed by the teacher. Monitoring means might include various tests, reports on the topics under study, and other assignments.

Thus, the inclusion of internet technologies in the process of teaching foreign languages is becoming an indispensable part of it and has a considerable number of advantages and disadvantages. We tried to elicit the difficulties that might occur in the process of teaching non-linguistic students online in the context of distance learning during the pandemic within two academic semesters. We collected survey responses and analyzed them.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper aims to elicit major difficulties in studying a foreign language online. It was important to distinguish between the difficulties and the language proficiency level.

Key research tasks include (1) eliciting major difficulties in learning a foreign language online and (2) distinguishing between the difficulties and the language proficiency level.

Our survey to elicit difficulties during online teaching was developed, taking into account the Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR] standards. Thus, we compiled questions to form an approximate list of average problems that hinder learning a foreign language.

The fundamental ideas of the Council of Europe Language Policy include multilingualism, linguistic diversity, mutual understanding, democratic citizenship, and social integration. Wilhelm von Humboldt, a German scientist, philologist, and philosopher of the late 18th–early 19th century, believed that "the diversity of languages reveals the riches of the world and the diversity of what we explore in it" (Humboldt, 1985, pp. 346-349). Moreover, "the person who is already competent in many languages, does not only learn other ones easily, but also anticipates their peculiarities beforehand owing to a trained linguistic feeling" (Humboldt, 1985, pp. 346-349). Today Humboldt's ideas are embodied in the concept of multilingualism within the Council of Europe Language Policy.

There is a language proficiency scale organized into several levels (see Tables 1–3) (Council of Europe, n.d.).

Table 1. A2 proficiency level

Understanding	Listening	I can understand questions, a list of which was presented to me in advance. I can understand short phrases and expressions.
	Reading	I can understand short texts, find necessary information, and grasp the general idea.
Speaking	Dialogue	I can answer simple questions on familiar topics. I can maintain a very short conversation on everyday topics.
	Monologue	I can use simple phrases and utterances to tell about myself or on a prepared topic.

Writing	Writing	I can write short and simple messages. I can write a simple personal letter.

Table 2. B1 proficiency level

Understanding	Listening	I can understand questions on a topic that I have prepared myself, as well as some everyday topics, when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.
	Reading	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.
Speaking	Dialogue	I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar to me.
	Monologue	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe my experiences and events. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Writing	Writing	I can write straightforward connected texts on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest describing my personal experiences and impressions.

Table 3. B2 proficiency level

Understanding	Listening	I can understand any questions, even unprepared, on everyday and job-related topics.
	Reading	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular stances or viewpoints.
Speaking	Dialogue	I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.
	Monologue	I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
Writing	Writing	I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view.

The grading scale given above has been instrumental in compiling a survey called Difficulties in learning a foreign language (written by O. V. Kozina and O. V. Miasnikova):

1. What university do you study at?
- Altai State University;
- Altai State Pedagogical University;
- Other.

2. How do you assess your foreign language competence?
- Excellent. I can enter a conversation and translate texts;
- Good. I can answer a limited number of questions and translate texts with a dictionary;
- Satisfactory. I cannot react to questions; I translate texts with difficulty;
- I do not know the foreign language; I cannot read.

3. Your current mark in the foreign language.
- Excellent;
- Good;
- Satisfactory.

4. I can understand questions, a list of which was presented to me in advance. I can understand short phrases and expressions.
- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I do not understand oral English / German speech;
- I have a limited vocabulary.

5. I can understand short texts, find necessary information, and grasp the general idea.
- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I cannot elicit the main idea of the whole text;
- I need more time to find the necessary information.

6. I can answer simple questions on familiar topics. I can maintain a very short conversation on everyday topics.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I cannot react quickly to questions of my interlocutor (confusion in English / German tenses and other grammar);
- I have a limited vocabulary on the topic.

7. I can use simple phrases and utterances to tell about myself or on a prepared topic.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I have a limited vocabulary on the topic;
- I do not know elementary grammatical and syntactic constructions.

8. I can write short, simple messages. I can write a simple personal letter.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I do not know the rules of writing letters;
- I cannot and I do not know how to think in English / German.

9. I can understand questions on a topic that I have prepared myself, as well as some everyday topics, when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I do not fully understand oral English / German speech;
- I do not know some syntactic structures, word combinations or clichés.

10. I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I have an insufficient job-related vocabulary;
- I do not fully understand the context.

11. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar to me.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I cannot react quickly to questions of my interlocutor (confusion in English / German Tenses and other Grammar);
- I have an insufficient vocabulary on the topic.

12. I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe my experiences and events. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I have an insufficient vocabulary on the topic;
- I do not know complicated grammatical and syntactic constructions.

13. I can write straightforward connected texts on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest describing my personal experiences and impressions.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I do not know the rules of writing;
- I cannot think in English / German.

14. I can understand any questions, even unprepared, on every day and job-related topics.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I partly understand oral English / German speech;
- I partly know complicated syntactic structures.

15. I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular stances or viewpoints.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I have an insufficient vocabulary on the contemporary range of problems;
- I only partly understand the main idea of the text.

16. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I cannot immediately start a conversation, enter a conversation at an appropriate moment or finish it;
- I am not sure about the choice of expressions or language patterns.

17. I can explain my viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I can use a limited number of linking means for joining separate utterances into a comprehensive whole;
- I cannot use certain complex syntactic constructions.

18. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view.

- If yes, turn to the next question;
- If no, choose the most appropriate answer to explain why;
- I do not know all rules of writing essays or reports;
- I have difficulty in giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view in English / German.

The survey involved 50 students of Altai State University and Altai State Pedagogical University who reside in CIS countries. All results were counted, systemized, and interpreted.

RESULTS

Initial survey questions have shown that the subjective estimation of students' language proficiency level given by both students and teachers is similar, assessed as "good," which does not refer to a particular language proficiency level.

At the A2 level, most students had no difficulties in either of the kinds of speech activity. All five questions had mostly "Yes" answers (65%).
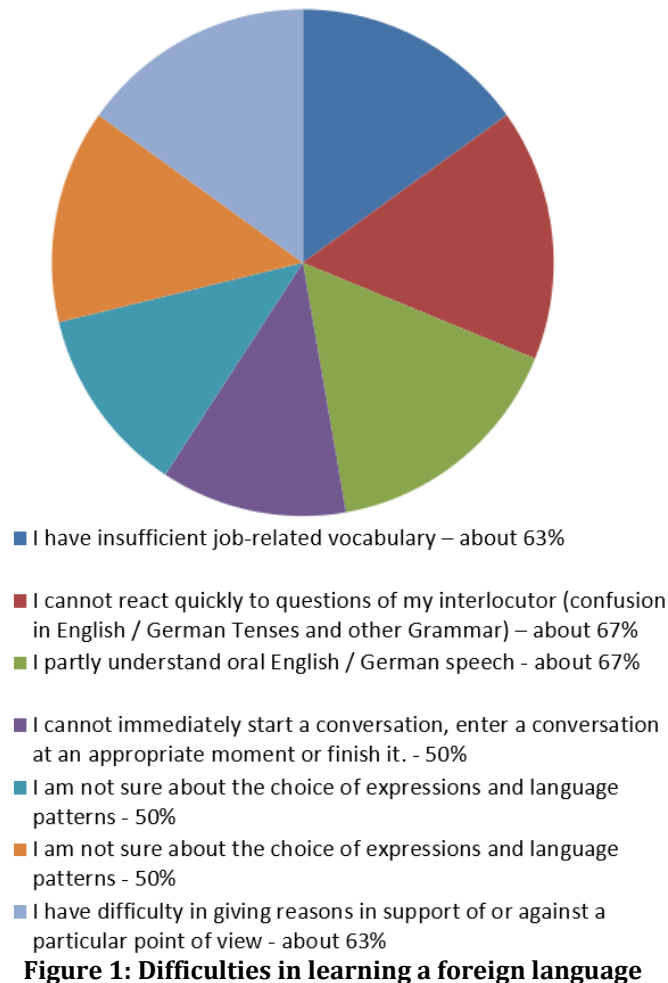
At the B1 level, certain difficulties appear. Students mentioned the following major problems:

- Understanding: I have an insufficient job-related vocabulary (about 63%);
- Speaking and dialogue: I cannot react quickly to questions of my interlocutor (confusion in English / German tenses and other grammar) (about 67%).

At the B2 level, students noted difficulties in all kinds of speech activity.

- Listening: I partly understand oral English / German speech (about 67%);
- Reading: I have an insufficient vocabulary on the contemporary range of problems (about 57%);
- Dialogue: I cannot immediately start a conversation, enter a conversation at an appropriate moment or finish it (50%); I am not sure about the choice of expressions and language patterns (50%);
- Monologue: I cannot use certain complex syntactic constructions (about 57%);
- Writing: I have difficulty in giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view in English / German (about 63%).

The difficulties mentioned above can be summarized in a diagram (Fig.1).

■ I have insufficient job-related vocabulary – about 63%

■ I cannot react quickly to questions of my interlocutor (confusion in English / German Tenses and other Grammar) – about 67%

■ I partly understand oral English / German speech - about 67%

■ I cannot immediately start a conversation, enter a conversation at an appropriate moment or finish it. - 50%

■ I am not sure about the choice of expressions and language patterns - 50%

■ I am not sure about the choice of expressions and language patterns - 50%

■ I have difficulty in giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view - about 63%

Figure 1: Difficulties in learning a foreign language

It was also observed that there is a certain correlation between the language proficiency level and difficulties. The higher the language proficiency level is, the more difficulties students face. The survey results show that the teacher's subjective assessment as "good" corresponds to the A2 level because students had hardly any difficulties at this level.

DISCUSSION

The issues of eliciting difficulties in teaching foreign languages to non-linguistic students appeared long ago. Most researchers, including E. G. Azimov (2019), G. V. Vishnevskaya (2011), I. I. Ignatenko (2019), and S. V. Kuznetsova (2015), have focused on particular kinds of speech activity. The process of distant teaching itself, its specific features, and prospects of its use at a maximum scale have also appealed to scholars (Burimskaya, 2019; Gutareva, 2006; Neiman 2017; Khudolei, 2019). Considering the difficulties in teaching foreign languages referred to in this research, the authors recognize that many language problems occur as a result of insufficient language literacy. That said, it has to be admitted that a higher level of psychological comfort is notable within the distant learning as a consequence of individualization of the process (Vishnevskaya, 2011; Gutareva, 2006; Yurkina, 2019; Shchukin, 2015). At the same time, one must agree that there are factors that directly cause language difficulties. They include, for example, a low level of computer literacy or self-organization skills. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many factors in the process of distant teaching, particularly concerning foreign languages. Researchers have been analyzing experience in transforming classes into an online format for determining the best practices (Bidarra, 2021; Dashtestani, 2020; Kasani, 2020; Chen, 2021; Hew, 2020; Chien, 2020; Metruk, 2020). The authors of this article have studied difficulties occurring in the process of teaching foreign languages to non-linguistic students in the Eurasian educational space during the pandemic to develop a perspective course of study that would allow increasing the quality of education. These issues were studied on the material of other excerpts by other researchers, including (Adzima, 2020; Samuel, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020). The current research was carried out on the MOODLE platform. There are also studies on other teaching platforms, e.g., *Second Life* (Han, 2020) or *Flipgrid* (Lowenthal, 2020).

The research sums up that the survey data have shown which particular difficulties are experienced by students in learning foreign languages in the Eurasian educational online space. All students had to study online for two

academic semesters due to an unfavorable epidemiological situation in the world. The search for ways to overcome the elicited difficulties made us turn to foreign language syllabi for students of non-linguistic departments.

The syllabus for non-linguistic higher educational institutions, edited by S. G. Ter-Minasova (2009) was taken as a frame of reference [8]. We compiled the following list of skills that every student should acquire on the completion of the course:

- Extracting general and specific information while reading authentic texts on the humanities or job-related topics in the original language without a dictionary;
- Detailed rendering of the content of authentic texts on the humanities or job-related topics in the foreign language in the oral or written form;
- Writing a synopsis of an authentic text on a job-related topic with own commentaries in accordance with the stylistic peculiarities of the target language;
- Extracting general and specific information while listening to authentic texts in the original language on the humanities or job-related topics delivered by a native speaker at normal speed;
- Communicatively correct conversation on the humanities or job-related topics in the target language at speed similar to that of a native speaker;
- Building a monologue on the humanities or job-related topics correctly in the communicative and cultural aspects in the oral and written form using authentic language material;
- Rendering a text on the humanities or job-related topics from Russian into the foreign language;
- Writing business and personal letters in a foreign language.
   On comparing the given list with the results of our survey, we have come to see that students have most difficulties in the following aspects:
- Working with authentic texts;
- Maintaining conversation to achieve communication goals in a foreign language.

Thus, planning and compiling syllabi should focus on working with job-related texts (enlarging vocabulary and learning grammatical constructions). Dialogic speech should also be given special attention. Areas of focus include learning conversational clichés for accelerating responses in different situations, listening to authentic speech to develop phonemic awareness, and developing personal characteristics of the partner in conversation, such as an ability to enter a conversation or give reasons for or against one's opinion.

CONCLUSION

The process of teaching a foreign language to students of non-linguistic departments in the Eurasian environment during the pandemic is effective if internet technologies are introduced. Moreover, there are many opportunities offered by internet technologies that allow one to develop different kinds of speech activity, namely, listening and speaking skills in the form of a monologue and dialogue on a particular topic and writing skills. These opportunities include selecting authentic texts, audio recordings (students' oral reports), discussions on various problems prepared with the help of the internet, electronic grammar books, reference books, and dictionaries.

Our experience of work at higher educational institutions shows that using internet technologies has several advantages as compared to traditional forms of education, namely, the communicative component, visualization of teaching materials, an opportunity to store a big amount of information, control automation, quick access to resources, and a possibility to change and replenish the course materials continuously. Besides, the research materials served as a basis for planning and compiling the foreign language syllabus and organizing students' work in the "Moodle" system with consideration to the difficulties students faced during online learning.

The survey results prove that Altai State University and Altai State Pedagogical University have a wide resource potential for conducting interactive classes using telecommunication means and multimedia, designed for individual and group learning forms. Thus, students get great opportunities for effective work, while teachers can monitor progress and manage the learning process.

It is particularly important that using the "Moodle" system has proven to be a promising perspective for developing teaching foreign languages online during the pandemic. The advantages of this system include simplicity of use for all participants, utility, and a wide range of communicative opportunities. Tasks within the foreign language course vary from traditional forms (e.g., text translation, rendering, grammar and vocabulary tests, speaking tasks on academic topics, etc.) of making presentations and projects. Students have an opportunity to do tasks either online at a convenient time or in PDF or Word format and send them to the teacher as an attachment for assignment.

To sum up, an intelligent elaboration of methodic, didactic, and technical components of distant education in teaching a foreign language to non-linguistic students who, by force of circumstances, cannot personally attend classes can make distant learning an effective form of education. Alongside that, continuous guidance given to students in the electronic educational environment, their motivation, and resource opportunities of electronic technologies facilitate overcoming difficulties in studying. The factors mentioned above help non-linguistic

students develop communicative competence, revealing advanced opportunities in teaching a foreign language and higher education in general.

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