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THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE FORMAT ON FORMING SOFT SKILLS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to identify opportunities to develop soft skills, which are essential for graduates' future professional activities, in online foreign language learning. The study focuses on distance learning, which has become a reality in university education due to the pandemic and the increased availability of higher education to those who cannot attend in-person classes (because of the distance, health problems, etc). Specifically, the research aims to demonstrate which soft skills, prioritized by employers, can and must be developed in distance foreign language learning, the preferred typology of exercises for this task, the specifics of teachers' work in this format, and how to mobilize active attention in distance education. The study uses survey results collected from teachers and students at Lomonosov Moscow State University, which are analyzed along with relevant theoretical models. The research prioritizes tasks and assignments targeting soft skills such as creativity, learnability, critical thinking, and collaboration, with independent student work gaining more importance. The study concludes that online lessons should emphasize autonomous work performance over primary educational elements, and the results can form the basis for developing foreign language methodology in distance instruction. The research suggests this could be an optional module in a hybrid format that shows promise for higher foreign language education.

Keywords: university education, foreign language teaching, soft skills, online learning, distance learning, pandemic, higher education, EFL, learnability, autonomous work performance, foreign language methodology, hybrid format.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Online learning will hardly ever go away; evidently, it is going to stay as blended learning or a hybrid format. Consequently, it must set the same aims and aspire to solve the same tasks as face-to-face education.

Lately, forming and developing so-called soft skills have become one of the main tasks of university education. Soft skills are skills and competencies which all graduates need regardless of their specialty or field of study.

As was previously shown by the authors [Vorontsova & Klyukina, 2021a], developing soft skills should become one of the priorities of foreign language teaching. Multiple research studies confirm the importance of soft skills for graduates' employability in the labour market [Cambridge Framework..., 2018; Vorontsova & Klyukina, 2021b]. Soft skills help graduates to integrate into society as a whole and into the professional environment in particular [Academic Board..., 2004].

P. Klaus [Klaus, 2008] points out that failure in business or career is seldom caused by the shortage of technical or professional knowledge, but is likely to be rooted in the lack of soft skills. If a worker does not know how to sell their ideas, how to get on with others, or submit the given assignment on time, their career will hardly be successful. Klaus defines soft skills as a wide range of qualities: self-awareness, reliability, conscientiousness, initiative, adaptability, critical thinking, empathy, integrity, risk-taking ability, and problem-solving, leadership, time management, just to name a few. Soft skills complement technical and professional knowledge and are absolutely essential in the changing job market.

In employers' view, the most in-demand soft skills are communication, teamwork and collaboration, creative thinking, and emotional development [World Economic Forum, 2020].

Writing about non-cognitive skills that in-person education develops, Morton [Morton, 2020] mentions social and emotional abilities to communicate with people of different backgrounds and social statuses, confidence to keep up an intellectual conversation with a professor, or determination to overcome one's self-consciousness while putting forward and defending one's viewpoint. As Morton warns, it is these abilities and skills that remain underdeveloped in distance learning. The question of whether teacher-student interaction during video conferences is as effective as in-person communication remains open. Face-to-face teacher-student interaction makes it possible for both sides to notice the slightest behavioral and emotional clues and to modify their behavior and activity in response.

"In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the role of emotions in academic settings, especially in how emotions shape student engagement and learning" [Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011, p. 1]. Emotions have been discovered to be an essential element in online learning contexts as well [Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012]. Moreover, some researchers believe that emotional development can serve as a determinant of students' readiness for online learning [Buzdar et al., 2016]. Emotional development has become one of the most important soft skills as well. It means the ability to perceive, analyze and manage one's emotions, as well as understand other people's feelings [Goleman, 2006]. One of the most frequent complaints coming from teachers with online instruction experience concerns the lack of direct emotional ties with students.

F. Darby [Darby, 2020] remarks that in offline instruction this emotional connection is established naturally – the teacher and the students greet each other in the corridor, at the beginning of the lesson the teacher may ask how the students are doing and at the end stay longer to answer questions or give consultation concerning an assignment or a project. During lessons, the teachers convey support and involvement through their mimics, body language, and other non-verbal means of communication. Outside classes students can address the teacher with a request or a question. Such communication happens naturally, and effortlessly. Though Darby primarily refers to asynchronous learning, i.e. without using online video conferencing, it may be assumed that in the case of synchronous remote learning this spontaneous, natural, lively interaction is either limited or requires special effort on the part of the teacher.

Most teachers find that learners demonstrate lower concentration of attention during remote video conferences because of what may be called “the glass wall” effect when the teacher is seen as if he or she were behind a glass wall in another room. Due to the absence of the feeling of belonging to a group, students’ motivation also decreases. Man is a social creature, thus, physical contact is essential. When the teacher and students are in the same room, they not only hear the voices and see each other, they engage in tactile sensations and energy flows. During a video conference the participants see and hear their counterparts, but they cannot “feel” them, which might cause discomfort and block active attention which in its turn hinders the retention of lexis and grammar.

When commenting on the emergency remote learning environment, educationalists also observe that the transfer of in-person instruction into an online course with the same quality is practically impossible. During face-to-face communication, a good teacher makes a success of a lesson through mimics, voice pitch and tone, glances, jokes, and spontaneous remarks with pupils, all the things that are noticeably limited in remote lessons.

The lack of non-verbal clues and the emotional contact with the teacher and the peers impedes the development of other soft skills, such as creative and critical thinking, collaboration, and learnability. But there are other hidden problems of distance education. One of them is phonetic perception, which might have a negative effect on the pace of the lesson, slowing it down.

“Phonetic clarity of speech” is an integral component of forming communicative competence and communication as a soft skill. In online forms of teaching and learning the source of the problem is in their inability to fully satisfy the prerequisites of the face-to-face format, i.e. natural communication environment, time management, the purity of the sounds coming from the teacher or its substitute – the computer-assisted pronunciation software – due to the frequent problems with connection, an impediment to fast interaction with the student for any type of corrective feedback [Hobson & Carpen, 2020].

According to Darby [Darby, 2020], distance learning by its nature erects barriers on the way to student engagement. The main difficulty of online education is how to establish emotional and social ties with the students and among them.

The ways to surmount this emotional barrier include making use of emotionally charged material (videos, images, narratives) [Miller, 2014], as such material strengthens emotional connections and student engagement. Other ways may include collaborative learning [Suryaningsih, 2021], creating chats and forums for communication, and allocating specific time for individual work, e.g. to answer students’ queries or to explain complex material.

Emotional development can also be fostered through students’ intrinsic motivation [Hobson & Carpen, 2020], i.e. by giving students a certain degree of autonomy, e.g. allowing them to have a say in the matter of choosing study materials or tasks, as well as via developing their competences with the help of structured, controlled and measured challenges. Emotional development can

be fostered if students trust the instructor, find value in the material and understand why they are studying it. As Hobson and Carpen put it “We need to engage students in considering “what’s in it for them” and identifying what they value will increase their persistence, and ultimately, their competence” [Hobson & Carpen, 2020].

One of the problems of online education is the absence of active attention, which lasts longer than passive attention and mobilizes long-term memory. L. Vygotsky connected active attention with conative guidance emanated by the teacher [Vygotsky, 1987]. However, many contemporary researchers consider that only emotions can be a source of active attention [Scherer, 2004]. In the online format, the teacher’s emotional impact on students is either absent or severely decreased. As for conative guidance, it can hardly serve as a constant source of active attention, because it is unknown whether students are really listening to their teacher or just pretending to be engaged in the lesson. It is the problems with active attention that can cause lower productivity of online classes in comparison with offline lessons. Altering the typology of exercises, increasing the proportion of creative tasks [Kaufmann & Vosburg, 1997], and introducing a different lesson plan, probably, in flipped learning format [Flipped learning, 2015], will allow for improving the efficacy of online instruction and making the formation of soft skills one of the main aims.

Thus, it appears that the emotional component is both a victim of remote learning and a potential agent of its success. It suffers first, triggering the demise of other aspects of learning, such as attention and memory, but it is the one that can help remote learning become more effective.

The study aims to demonstrate which soft skills, among those prioritized by employers, can be and must be developed in distance foreign language learning; which typology of exercises is preferable in solving this task; how to mobilize active attention in distance education.

2. METHODS

The main purpose of conducting the surveys among students and teachers is to determine what causes the greatest difficulties in teaching and acquiring a foreign language when shifting onto remote learning; to discover how distance learning affects soft skills formation; which soft skills could be developed online to an adequate level and which to a limited degree; whether the students’ opinion matches that of the teachers. Based on the results of the surveys, a conclusion will be made on the possibility and necessity of adjusting foreign language teaching methods to the online format, the recommended typology of tasks, and the peculiarities of testing and assessment in distance learning.

2.1. Participants

The respondents (71 people, aged between 20 – 22, mean age 21) were students at the College of Asian and African Studies (CAAS, Lomonosov Moscow State University) in their 5th or 7th semester, mastering two or three foreign languages – an Oriental one and one or two West European ones. CAAS students are non-philologists, but they have 14-16 academic hours of foreign languages per week and major in one of the specializations – history, economics, or political science. The large number of hours of foreign language learning allows these students to assess the difficulty of shifting to remote learning and the quality of soft skills development.

The next stage was to conduct a survey among the foreign language faculty of CAAS. Sixteen teachers participated, each having prior experience of working offline, online, and in the hybrid format. The respondents (17 persons) were aged between 30 and 60, with the length of pedagogical experience being from five to 35 years.

2.2. Procedure

The survey among the students was conducted in September 2021 via Google Forms, anonymously. The questionnaire used the methods of close-ended questions with multiple choice and close-ended questions with the choice of one option fitting their opinion. The survey of the faculty was also conducted in September 2021 anonymously and contained four questions, which were different from the questions of the students, but allowed to compare the opinions of students and teachers.

The findings of the two surveys were compared with each other, with the theoretical premises, as well as with the authors' hypothesis that when shifting to the online format, the methods need to be corrected towards placing a greater focus on creative tasks (enhancing creative thinking), on presenting one's own research in the online format (learning to learn and present the results of one's work) and presenting projects done independently or as part of a team (collaboration).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students were supposed to answer 5 questions. Below are the obtained results.

The main conclusions made from the students' survey are as follows:

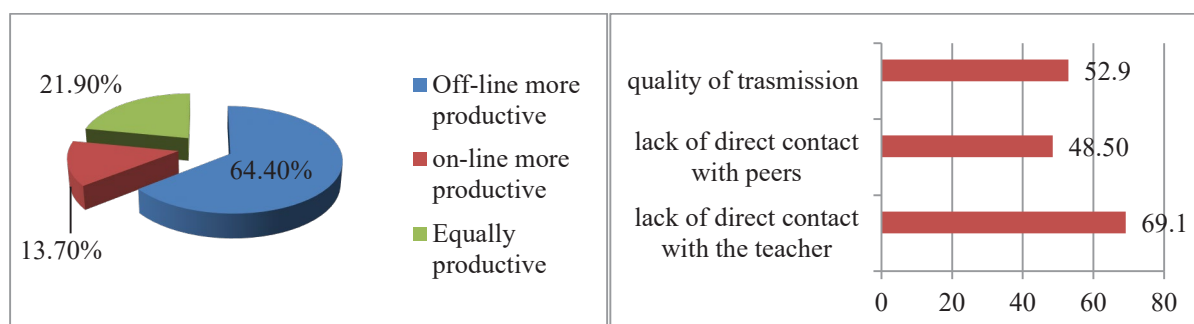


Fig.1. Students' opinions on the efficacy of different formats (percentage of respondents)

Fig.2. Factors that make online education less productive (percentage of respondents)

- the absolute majority of respondents (64.4 %) consider offline classes more effective (Fig. 1);
- the main obstacle to making remote lessons more productive is the lack of direct contact with the teacher (Fig. 2);

- the tasks which are connected with perceiving the audio signal (phonetical exercises and listening) are the most difficult, which can be explained by the low-quality internet signal, a slight delay in signal transmission even with high-quality internet and the work of the internet platform where the lesson is conducted;

- the utmost difficulty is experienced by the students while doing online tasks aimed at forming communicative and emotional competencies, as well as collaborative skills, which are the most in-demand skills among employers; the students face less difficulty when doing the tasks typical of traditional teaching methods, i.e. grammar exercises and tasks targeting the active vocabulary practice;

- remote lessons can be made more productive by intensifying the techniques connected with mobilizing active attention and engaging the emotional component in a foreign language lesson, e.g. songs, videos, and creative tasks; 40 % of students consider that implementing the so-called “short step” technique, i.e. constant change of activities when a certain type of assignments does not take longer than 10-12 minutes, which is connected with active attention [Vygotsky, 1987].

The findings make one reflect on the necessity of altering the teaching methods and the lesson structure if the main aim of education is not the knowledge of the subject, but its application when developing communicative and emotional competencies, as well as teamwork skills.

Below are the results of the faculty survey.

<i>1. What do you consider more effective when working online or offline?</i>	<i>Online</i>	<i>Offline</i>	<i>equally</i>
Drilling grammar	1	7	8
Working on lexis	1	10	5
Correcting phonetics	2	13	1
<i>2. In which format are competencies better developed:</i>	<i>Online</i>	<i>Offline</i>	<i>equally</i>
Speaking	2	8	6
Listening	2	8	6
Reading	1	7	8
<i>3. In which format are soft skills better developed:</i>	<i>Online</i>	<i>Offline</i>	<i>equally</i>
Critical thinking	2	6	8
Creative thinking	2	5	9
Learning to learn	2	10	5
Communication	1	12	4
Collaboration	1	12	4

Most teachers share the opinion that in-person teaching works better for phonetics correction and lexical tasks, whereas for grammatical exercises the format is not so important. In fact, both formats work equally efficiently. It can possibly be explained by more mechanistic drilling of grammar, without much emotional engagement unlike in lexical tasks. The emotional ties with the teacher and his/her charisma contribute to mobilizing active attention when learning face-to-face [Safronova & Klyukina, 2020], when the active attention is intensified, it results in more successful lexis retention. Phonetic corrections are more difficult when done remotely. As far as listening,

speaking, and reading skills are concerned, the opinions were divided half-and-half, which implies that not all teachers face difficulties when developing such communicatively significant skills as speaking and listening when working online.

When analyzing soft skills, most teachers identify three major soft skills that suffer most in remote instruction, namely, communication, learnability, and teamwork. Comparing these results with the students' survey findings, it is possible to conclude that both students and teachers consider that the transition to the distance format impedes the formation and development of these soft skills, which are essential for the modern job market. Remote learning is suitable for doing exercises, where it causes the least difficulty. However, it impedes competence development and causes the greatest difficulty when aiming to develop soft skills required by employers in the labour market. The students are more critical than teachers when assessing the efficacy of the remote format. It can possibly be explained by the fact that the opinion of the students who participated in the survey was influenced not only by the study of the Western European language but also by the difficulties in the study of the Middle Eastern or Asian languages.

The last question on the efficiency of various forms of control online is important for working out the main requirements for the teaching methods used in distance or hybrid format and the typology of exercises. Most teachers responded that the most effective forms of control were those which imposed a time limit or the factor of the unknown (the essay topic is not given beforehand, and there is no possibility to get prepared or search the Internet), which maximizes the students' autonomy when completing the task.

The results of the survey confirmed the necessity to develop a special concept of remote foreign language learning if it purports not just to acquire the linguistic tools, but to use the language as an instrument in further professional activity and to form soft skills required for a successful career in the current job market. Changing the teaching methods for distance education implies the shift towards creative tasks (presenting one's own research and team projects, discussions, and round table talks), which will allow one to develop such competencies as creative thinking, learning to learn, and collaboration and will fill the gap in the emotional component of a foreign language lesson which suffers greatly in distance educational setting but which is essential for active attention in class. Without active attention, it is not possible to effectively retain lexis or grammatical structures. This learning format should involve students' autonomous work, transferring part of the activities of a traditional face-to-face lesson with a teacher on to students' independent research activity. An important component of adjusting a foreign language lesson to an online format is the "short step", i.e. frequent change of activities or material during the lesson, which is confirmed both by the survey results and the authors' theoretical assumptions.

The main vector of adjusting the typology of tasks is to transfer the routine assignments – grammar drilling, lexical exercises on matching, transformation of grammatical or lexical structures into synonymous ones, answering questions to a text, and others – to students' independent work. Without active (engaged) attention the effective usage of these tasks is not possible online. The cause of non-existent or low engaged attention is the lack of emotional contact with the teacher, which is cited by the students as the main factor of poor efficiency of the lesson in remote learning. Videos, songs, and games can only partially make up for the emotional contact with the teacher and peers. Flipped learning is suitable for distance instruction when an in-person class is devoted to displaying one's autonomous work with a compulsory creative component.

Testing causes specific difficulties when conducted online. The results of the survey show that effective forms of testing were those, which imposed a time limit and assessed the efficacy of participating in creative projects and discussions. It is also essential to assess such soft skills as learning to learn, critical and creative thinking, as well as collaboration and teamwork.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study's findings lead to the following conclusions:

- Developing and cultivating soft skills (such as communication, learnability, collaboration, creativity, and emotional intelligence) is essential and feasible through online or hybrid formats, which are potential options for higher education.
- The primary reasons for decreased productivity in forming soft skills online are the absence of emotional connection with teachers and peers, reduced levels of active attention, and challenges with forming phonetically clear speech.
- Creative tasks such as presentations, project-based learning, discussions, and debates can help compensate for the emotional aspect of the lesson by engaging students' attention while working on interesting topics and creating a competitive atmosphere in class. Additionally, incorporating flipped learning educational technology can boost productivity in online foreign language classes.

The practical implication of the study is an alternative curriculum for foreign language instruction at the CAAS, Lomonosov Moscow State University, in the event of online or hybrid format adoption.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest

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