



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY

Clifford A. Shaffer,
Virginia Tech, United States

REVIEWED BY

Hariharan N. Krishnasamy,
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

*CORRESPONDENCE

Zulfiya R. Akhmetzadina
✉ zrakh@rambler.ru;
✉ linguist-2017@mail.ru

RECEIVED 16 December 2022

ACCEPTED 02 May 2023

PUBLISHED 30 May 2023

CITATION

Akhmetzadina ZR, Mukhtarullina AR,
Starodubtseva EA, Kozlova MN and
Pluzhnikova YA (2023) Review of effective
methods of teaching a foreign language to
university students in the framework of online
distance learning: international experience.
Front. Educ. 8:1125458.
doi: 10.3389/educ.2023.1125458

COPYRIGHT

© 2023 Akhmetzadina, Mukhtarullina,
Starodubtseva, Kozlova and Pluzhnikova. This is
an open-access article distributed under the
terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution
License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or
reproduction in other forums is permitted,
provided the original author(s) and the
copyright owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is cited, in
accordance with accepted academic practice.
No use, distribution or reproduction is
permitted which does not comply with these
terms.

Review of effective methods of teaching a foreign language to university students in the framework of online distance learning: international experience

Zulfiya R. Akhmetzadina^{1*}, Aigul R. Mukhtarullina²,
Elena A. Starodubtseva³, Maria N. Kozlova³ and
Yulia A. Pluzhnikova⁴

¹Sibai Institute (Branch), Bashkir State University, Sibai, Russia, ²Bashkir State University, Ufa, Russia, ³Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia, ⁴Kolomna Institute (Branch) of Moscow Polytechnic University, Kolomna, Russia

The research goal is to analyze the existing and most frequently used 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. We 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

ELL competencies, education, ELT competencies, online learning, students, video blog, synchronous communication

1. Introduction

Global integrative trends, expansion of intercultural interaction, and rapid social development contribute to mastering one or more foreign languages not only to communicate with representatives of other cultures but also to improve professional skills since modern society requires specialists to solve global issues (Berger, 2021). Teaching a foreign language has long gone beyond the boundaries of classrooms. The very term “distance learning of foreign

languages” includes an entire educational paradigm related to the socio-cognitive, pragmatic, and ethical aspects of the foreign-speaking world.

Both foreign language learners and teachers in the process of communication face not only issues related to ethnicity and dilemmas associated with historically, socially, and culturally different psychology and worldviews. It includes ways of rationalizing perception, knowledge structures, attitudes, and the choice of expressing these feelings and beliefs. For both students and teachers, language learning and cognition are inseparable from the emotional component, which regulates adaptation to changes caused by external and internal educational events. Considering these issues within the framework of the psycholinguistic discipline, several studies (Ko and Rossen, 2017; Marlina, 2018; Liu et al., 2021; McCallum, 2022) propose a set of interrelated methods and actions, including (1) systematic approach to developing the competencies of a foreign language learner and teacher; (2) introduction of a psycholinguistic approach to the study/teaching of a foreign language [ELL/ELT – English Language Learning and English Language Teaching], which highlights the student, their personality; (3) support of language training programs for graduates and postgraduates with ethnolinguistic components of intercultural learning; (4) development of compatible formats of teacher and student research activities and mechanisms for the use of these products (Marlina, 2018). This collective monograph examines the tasks related to implementing these actions, with recommendations leading to a methodological basis for developing a linguistic personality in ELT. The proposed methodologies appeared by virtue of a series of studies by scholars (Kholod, 2018; Marlina, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021) in the field of linguistic categorization of emotions, language acquisition, and bilingual identity, as well as the basics of culture research in language education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education. Almost overnight, it stopped teaching in most educational institutions and gradually affected all levels of education. The situation was unprecedented. Educational institutions had to switch to a new form of education rapidly. The pandemic has affected both the means and the forms, methods, and teaching approaches, including the competency paradigm in teaching a foreign language (Wang and Zou, 2021; Samorodova et al., 2022). The tasks of the pedagogical community are to create conditions for building up the information technology base of educational institutions, developing, and implementing adapted teaching methods based on the potential of information technologies. For example, Russia is implementing the National Project “Education,” which plans to “...create by 2024 a new and secure digital educational environment in all educational institutions at every level, which will ensure high quality and accessibility of education of all types and levels” (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2022). The Modern Digital Educational Environment (MDEE) was created as part of the project, uniting more than 100 Russian universities and 70 different educational platforms. Currently, MDEE offers 1,560 courses on various subjects where students can improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities in their major (Akubekova and Kulyeva, 2021).

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).

The following tasks have been actualized to achieve the aim:

1. Classifying the methods of teaching a foreign language based on the competency approach;
2. Identifying the most effective methods according to teachers and students.

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. Besides, we used the method of interviewing teachers and students in the form of an anonymous questionnaire.

The methodological basis includes methods of analyzing the practical experience of teaching foreign languages based on the competency approach, synthesis of national and international teaching experience, comparison of national models of the language environment, and generalization of sociological data in the distance segment.

2. Assessing the effectiveness of distance learning in foreign languages

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 English-language programs at all three stages of the Bologna process. According to the [Masterportal.com](https://www.masterportal.com) portal, there are over 20,000 bachelor’s programs in English, 22,000 master’s programs, 2,500 Ph.D. programs, and about 5,000 online degree programs in Europe (Balan, 2022). From 2014 to 2021, the number of English-taught bachelor’s programs increased by 2.47 times. Simultaneously, English-language programs are equally available at state universities on a paid and budgetary basis. For international students from outside the EU jurisdiction, free English-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 English-language programs, students must submit diplomas of international exams confirming the level of English proficiency (PTE Academic, IELTS

Academic, TOEFL iBT) (Balan, 2022). The largest share of English-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.

3. 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 EFL students (English as a foreign language). 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 EFL students mastering the English 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 to Greek-speaking students has also been tested in European countries. As

practice shows, the most preferable is the division of students into microgroups (3–4 students). According to the gender composition of microgroups, 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 conferences.

4. Methods of learning English using artificial intelligence methods

Methods based on artificial intelligence are of undoubted interest for teachers of higher educational institutions. In the studies of Liu et al. (2021), an application for studying the concept of a foreign language is proposed, combining the study of the concept of English and artificial intelligence technologies, such as automatic generation of options and speech recognition analysis. The app is based on a WeChat mini program aimed at helping and conducting English language learning by providing various exercises such as multiple-choice and phonetic questions. To generate incorrect variants of multiple-choice questions, scientists utilize new words from WordNet. It is a large English lexical database in which word combinations are detected using statistical processing of natural language and neural network models, such as Continuous bag of words [CBOW] in Word2vec or BERT [Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers]. The user’s voice input is built into the speech interaction for recognition and analysis. Based on the framework, scholars expect that this application will be combined with other artificial intelligence [AI] technologies to analyze user performance and adjust the subsequent curriculum accordingly (Liu et al., 2021).

The study by [Ogbonna et al. \(2019\)](#) provides an example of the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication [SCMC] in English lessons at Wuhan University (China) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal is to identify the advantages and disadvantages of using applications with synchronous technologies in online English courses. The data set consists of ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with the teacher and students. Thematic analysis shows that the advantages of SCMC include the availability of extensive learning resources, the availability of instant information exchange, and a relatively calm learning environment. The two main drawbacks are that face-to-face communication generally leads to the teacher showing “one person,” and the limited screen size reduces eye contact between the teacher and the students. The research ([Ogbonna et al., 2019](#)) shows that SCMC can be used during and after a pandemic to stimulate student discussion and cooperation.

5. Methodology of formation of communicative foreign language digital competency

Both voice and video blogs are widely used in various fields. Their use in learning English as a foreign language [EFL], mainly at universities, aims at improving the listening and speaking skills of students ([Ogbonna et al., 2019](#); [Zhang et al., 2021](#)). Few studies have examined how involving EFL students in creating video blogs can help improve their conversational speech ([Liu et al., 2021](#); [McCallum, 2022](#)). Therefore, the publication of [Wang and Zou \(2021\)](#) is a study of the impact of the creation of voice and video blogs on the spoken language of EFL students and their perception of digital multimodal composition based on video blogs [DMC]. Sixty-seven high school students from Guangdong Province, China, participated in the 10-week study. The data included their preliminary and post-test performance evaluations, two videos, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. The research results displayed a positive effect of DMC on conversational speech based on video blogs. The students showed better fluency from the first to the second video blogs. Additionally, EFL students leading video blogs surpassed their colleagues in accuracy but lost in fluency, in which they demonstrated some significant changes ([Wang and Zou, 2021](#)). The Russian experience of testing the methodology for the formation of communicative foreign language digital competency is focused on the use of YouTube video hosting in teaching a foreign language.

Portal features included in classroom and extracurricular activities can enhance learning quality ([Ezhova and Pats, 2020](#)). By producing, sharing, and commenting on educational videos, YouTube promotes student engagement in a creative and collaborative learning environment. The advantages of the portal in teaching a foreign language are the following. A wide range of video materials – from video lessons created specifically to use in teaching a foreign language to vlogs edited by bloggers, which can also be included in the educational process – make it possible to work with authentic texts, listen to the speech of native speakers, and enter into dialogues with them. The visibility of information makes it possible to increase the efficiency of the learning process. While watching, it is possible to pay attention to articulatory features, facial expressions, and pantomime ([Borshcheva and Kuzmina, 2021](#)). Teachers of Bashkir State University,

Bashkir State University, and Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation during the survey indicated that it is also important that the student receives information about the appearance of the communication participants and the environment in which events take place. Videos can become a means of providing background information, an idea of the life, traditions, and reality of the countries of the studied language; these contribute to the implementation of such an important requirement of the communicative methodology of language cognition as immersion in a foreign language reality and its comprehension.

6. Conclusion

Among the wide variety of methods, competency-based approaches related to information and communication technologies [ICT] are utilized most often. We also suggest that when language teachers conduct courses using SCMC tools or platforms, students should be given wide opportunities to express their opinions. Additionally, most teachers recognize creating instructional videos as the most effective for forming students’ creative abilities. According to students, this type of activity also has the greatest learning effect and stimulates creativity, making the learning process more interesting and effective.

The consideration of several relevant competency-based approaches is the practical significance of reviewing effective methods of teaching a foreign language to university students in the framework of distance online learning based on national and international experience.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher’s note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

- Akubekova, D. G., and Kulyeva, A. A. (2021). Digitalization of academic forms of teaching English. *Kazan Pedagogical J.* 6, 113–119. doi: 10.51379/KPJ.2021.150.6.016
- Alipichev, A., and Takanova, O. (2020). Independent research activity of MSc and PhD students: case-study of the development of academic skills FFL classes. *XLinguae* 13, 237–252. doi: 10.18355/XL.2020.13.01.18
- Almehlafi, S. S. (2021). Online study of English language courses using blackboard at Saudi universities in the era of COVID-19: perception and use. *PSU Res. Rev.* 5, 16–32. doi: 10.1108/PRR-08-2020-0026
- Bailey, D., Almusharraf, N., and Hatcher, R. (2021). Finding satisfaction: intrinsic motivation for synchronous and asynchronous communication in the online language learning context. *Educ. Inform. Technol.* 26, 2563–2583. doi: 10.1007/s10639-020-10369-z
- Baker, W. (2020). “English as a lingua franca and transcultural communication: rethinking competencies and pedagogy for ELT” in *Ontologies of the English language: conceptualizing language for learning, teaching and evaluation*. eds. C. Hall and R. Wicaksono (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 253–272.
- Balan, R. S. (2022). Best English-Taught Universities in Europe in 2022. Available at: <https://www.mastersportal.com/articles/2979/best-english-taught-universities-in-europe-in-2022.html>
- Berger, A. (2021). “Advanced English language competency at the intersection of programme design, pedagogical practice, and teacher research: an introduction. Developing advanced English language competency,” in *Developing Advanced English Language Competence*. Vol 22. eds. A. Berger, H. Heaney, P. Resnik, A. Rieder-Bünemann and G. Savukova (English Language Education, Springer, Cham).
- Borshcheva, O. V., and Kuzmina, G. Y. (2021). YouTube in teaching foreign languages at university. Available at: <https://scipress.ru/pedagogy/articles/videokhosting-youtube-v-obuchenii-inostrannomu-yazyku-v-vuze.html>
- Ezhova, Y. V., and Pats, M. V. (2020). YouTube as a training resource (foreign language, non-language university). *Int. J. Human. Nat. Sci.* 7-2, 36–39. doi: 10.24411/2500-1000-2020-10880
- Hovhannisyan, G. R. (2022). Psycholinguistic competencies and interculturality in ELT. *Eng. Lang. Educ.* 24, 15–33.
- Hulme, A. K. (2022). Future of education is identified in the OU’s innovating pedagogy report 2022. Available at: https://ou-iet.cdn.prismic.io/ou-iet/5c334004-5f87-41f9-8570-e5db7be8b9dc_innovating-pedagogy-2022.pdf
- Kholod, N. I. (2016). Application of the dilemmas method in teaching a foreign language at higher education institution. *Language Culture*. Available at: https://vestnik.tspu.edu.ru/files/vestnik/PDF/articles/kholod_n_i_92_95_7_196_2018.pdf
- Kholod, N. I. (2018). Application of moral dilemmas method for students’ communicative competency development in classes of foreign language at higher education institution. *Bull. Tomsk State Pedagogical Univ.* 7, 92–95. doi: 10.23951/1609-624X-2018-7-92-95
- Ko, S., and Rossen, S. (2017). *Online learning: A practical guide*, 4th. London: Routledge.
- Liu, R., Shu, H., Li, P., Xu, Y., Yong, P., and Li, R. (2021). AI-based language chatbot 2.0 – the design and implementation of English language concept learning agent app. *Lect. Notes Comput. Sci.* 13089, 25–35. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-92836-0_3
- Marinina, Y. A., and Kruchinkina, G. A. (2020). Digital humanities: the possibility of using intelligent learning systems. *Lecture Notes Netw. Syst.* 129, 395–402.
- Marlina, R. (2018). “Teaching language skills” in *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. ed. J. Liontas (New York: Wiley), 1–15.
- McCallum, L. (2022). “English language teaching in the EU: an introduction” in *English language teaching. English language teaching: theory, research and pedagogy*. ed. L. McCallum (Singapore: Springer), 3–10.
- Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation (2022). National project “Education.” Available at: <https://edu.gov.ru/national-project>
- Ogbonna, K. G., Ibezim, N. E., and Obi, K. A. (2019). Synchronous and asynchronous e-learning in text processing training: an experimental approach. *S. Afr. J.* 39, 1–15. doi: 10.15700/saje.v39n2a1383
- Samorodova, E. A., Belyaeva, I. G., Birova, J., and Kobylarek, A. (2022). Technology-based methods for creative teaching and learning of foreign languages. *Lecture Notes Netw. Syst.* 345, 797–810. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-89708-6_65
- Wang, Z., and Zou, D. (2021). Synchronous computer mediated communication in English language classes during the pandemic: a case study of Wuhan. *Lect. Notes Comput. Sci.* 13089, 325–333. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-92836-0_28
- Zhang, N., Liu, H., and Liu, K. (2021). Enhancing EFL learners’ English vocabulary acquisition in WeChat official account tweet-based writing. *Lect. Notes Comput. Sci.* 13089, 71–83. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-92836-0_7
- Zubr, V., and Sokolova, M. (2021). Evaluation of distance learning from the perspective of university students – a case study. *Lect. Notes Comput. Sci.* 13089, 61–68. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-92836-0_6