

Distance Teaching and Learning: Online Marathons as a Tool of Improving Foreign Language Skills

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Abstract

Online marathons in social networks are a novel evolving form of interaction between the university and the student, up-to-date and student-centered. Such approach can be introduced into the traditional curriculum as a facilitated, appealing and motivating component of the educational process. The opportunity to interact with an online consultant and receive feedback together with the comfortable learning environment can encourage students' motivation.

The purpose of this research is to propose a new hybrid model of teaching a foreign language, which will meet the requirements of the modern society and, if necessary, can be easily transformed into distance learning format.

The model was developed based on an online marathon, created and held in terms of the predefined factors of students' motivational sphere, as well as the analysis of the participants' feedback.

Keywords ¹

Online marathon, social networks, education, online education, distance learning, model of teaching, hybrid model, teaching method, foreign language.

1. Introduction

The present social and economic processes require new forms of organization of the educational process, one of which is distance learning. This phenomenon is so actively touched upon by scientists when discussing educational issues, that it has become strongly associated with progress and improving the quality of education. Moreover, the concept "distance" may refer to a wide range of approaches, starting from the typical format of a "talking head" to the use of complex cloud technologies. Various forms of distance learning are actively gaining popularity in Russia due to the program of economic modernization, which is grounded on the notions "digitalization" and "innovation". As a result, digitalization, becoming a social phenomenon, generates many novel forms of organization of the educational process. The main purpose of their implementation is to transform the educational environment and the cognitive state of the student through distance learning.

According to the World Economic Forum, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to worldwide school closures; 1.2 billion school and university students in 186 countries have faced the challenges of distance learning. Inevitably, this situation has resulted in serious changes in the field of education, an increase in demand for online programs and teaching remotely using all kinds of digital platforms. The study also showed that online learning facilitates the process of gaining knowledge, takes less time and resources. This means that the changes brought by the pandemic will remain with us for long [18].

SLET-2020: International Scientific Conference on Innovative Approaches to the Application of Digital Technologies in Education, November 12-13, 2020, Stavropol, Russia

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CEUR Workshop Proceedings (CEUR-WS.org)

Nevertheless, there are some issues to be addressed. A large number of students do not have stable Internet access and/or equipment necessary for participation in distance learning. This gap is determined not only by the level of economic development of countries, but also by the levels of income within the country. E.g., according to the OECD, 95% of students in Switzerland, Norway and Austria have a computer for learning activities, while in Indonesia only 34% use a computer for the same purpose [14].

There is some evidence that the access to the necessary technology has a positive impact on the results of distance learning for a number of reasons. Some studies show that, on average, students acquire 25-60% more material when taught online, compared with 8-10% in the classroom. This is mainly due to the fact that distance learning takes 40-60% less time than the traditional one. Students can study at their own comfortable pace, making pauses, returning to the beginning and rereading, skipping or speeding up the material [8].

Addressing the education system as a whole, not just distance learning will reveal that it can not keep pace with the rapidly changing world. *Yuval Noah Harari*, in his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, says that the pandemic has irrevocably changed the existing outdated education system. The scientist emphasizes the fact that schools still focus on academic skills and cramming rather than developing critical thinking and adaptability skills, which are more essential for future success [19].

However, the effectiveness of distance learning varies among different age groups. E.g., teaching children, especially young ones, requires a structured environment because they are more easily distracted and cannot concentrate as long as adolescents or adults. Therefore, to get a full access to the benefits of distance learning, educators are to make coordinated efforts to create a unique environment, going beyond a simple replication of a face-to-face lesson/lecture via video. They should use a range of tools and methods for interaction and collaboration, aimed at upholding such basic principles of modern education as inclusion, personalization and intellectual development. At the same time, information technologies can make learning not only effective, but also entertaining. The productive integration of games into the educational process can be considered as a proof. This initiative made it possible to increase the motivation and interest among elementary school students, encouraging them to fall for learning. The participants of our research were adults aged 17-45 and over. The paper considers the applicability of social networking sites (SNSs) and online marathons for educational purposes of the university curriculum.

2. Purpose and objectives of the research

Online marathons in SNSs are a novel evolving form of interaction between the university and the student, up-to-date and student-centered. We believe that such approach can be introduced into the traditional curriculum as a facilitated, appealing and motivating component of the educational process. The opportunity to interact with an online consultant and receive feedback together with the comfortable learning environment can encourage students' motivation.

Additional educational opportunities are provided by SNSs and popular educational accounts. The pages of social media can be not only entertaining, but also educational and informative.

During the pandemic and worldwide isolation, the use of social media for generating educational content has become incredibly popular and in demand. People had more free time for social networks, many felt an urgent need to acquire new knowledge and professions, some felt the lack of live communication and made up for it on the Internet. University students, in particular, created numerous groups on VKontakte (a popular Russian social network) and Instagram to discuss educational issues, download and upload lectures, seminars, assignments, etc.

Russian SNSs provide a lot of commercial and non-commercial activities for attracting new followers. One of such event is so-called *marathon*. Marathon is a series of concise lessons which are given in a short period of time comprising a large volume of information or activities, supported by tutoring and consulting. Marathon can be of different spheres business, sport, cooking, psychology, developing new skills and obtaining new knowledge. The current pandemic situation triggered the marathons development of different kinds.

In order to increase the motivation and interest of students in English learning and maintain the interest in joining classes during mass self-isolating, it was decided to hold an online marathon on the accounts of the *Language Quest* language school on Instagram and VK.

Language Quest, created in 2017, is the language school of the educational center at the Department of Foreign Languages and Professional Communication of Kursk State University. The school's accounts can be found in the popular social networks VKontakte and Instagram. From the very beginning, a lot of attention was paid to the social networks, monitoring the activity of the users, their preferences and needs for educational content. *Language Quest* offers students with different language skills various foreign language courses, both in the usual face-to-face group format and online one using distance technologies such as Zoom, Jitsi Meet, Google Classroom, Quizlet, etc.

The purpose of the study was to propose a new hybrid model of teaching a foreign language, which will meet the requirements of the modern society and, if necessary, can be easily transformed into distance format.

The model was developed based on an online marathon, created and held in terms of the predefined factors of students' motivational sphere, as well as the analysis of the participants' feedback.

3. Literature review

Despite the fact that all the educational institutions worldwide switched to distance learning only in 2020, the very concept of distance learning is not something new and unusual. Back in 2001, *Mehrotra, Hollister* and *McGahey* defined distance learning not as an opportunity of future which higher education should be ready for, but as a contemporary phenomenon that challenged educational institutions; the phenomenon, giving the student a wide choice of study options: educational institution, timing, format and teachers; the phenomenon making education more accessible to population [11].

Distance learning was also discussed in the works of *Moore* [13]. According to the scientist, it is a set of educational methods in terms of which the teaching process is separated from the learning process, so that the communication between the teacher and the student happens via printed, electronic, mechanical or other tools. "*Distance teaching may be defined as the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors, including those that in a contiguous situation would be performed in the learner's presence, so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical, or other devices*" [13]. The main features of distance learning are still separation of teacher and learner and mediated communication which should be sustained, well-organized and managed [4, 6, 15]. Distance learning has the ability to meet the needs of the learner due to the flexible, virtual form of education and it allows receiving education by the residents of remote regions, where there are no other opportunities for vocational training or obtaining high-quality higher education.

We consider distance learning to be not just the use of computers and the Internet. It also involves active interaction of the participants of the educational process within the framework of training courses via educational platforms and SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter, VKontakte, Instagram. Although they were not designed specifically for educational purposes, people can use them to interact with native speakers [8] outside the classroom and improve their language skills. Here are the works describing the language learning potentials of SNSs [e.g., 1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17]. As an example, *Kabilan et al.* [6] conducted an attitudinal study with 300 Malaysian and proved that Facebook could be utilized as a useful tool to improve learners' English language skills, to increase learners' motivation to communicate in English, and to boost their confidence in practicing their English [12]. In the study of *Talip Gonulal* observed how English language learners used Instagram for language learning purposes and to reveal their attitudes towards it. The work proves that Instagram has the potential to help English learners to improve overall language skills in general, and vocabulary and communication skills in particular [5].

Here in the present study we believe that SNSs, in particular, Instagram and VKontakte can be used for educational purposes as a convenient platform, place for interacting with students; and

marathons are beneficial forms of organizing some modules which can be included into educational process. They can serve as an easy and useful venue for enhancing language learning and improving cultural awareness as well.

For half a century, distance learning has been considered as a controversial phenomenon with its advantages and disadvantages. However today it is not just a part of reality, it is an urgent measure. Its implementation it is no longer a choice, but an obligation of any educational institution. The main issue that concerns the Ministry of Education, the scientists, the teachers and the students is the quality of distance learning.

4. Methodology

To design the hybrid model of educational process, in particular English language teaching, which can be easily transformed into distance learning format we have conducted multi-staged research.

There were three stages of the research. First, the students were instructed to participate in a questionnaire 1 in Google docs posted in Language Quest accounts on Instagram and VKontakte. It included 5 multiple choice questions and 5 open-ended questions and was divided into four main sections: A) Personal Background; B) Instagram and VKontakte Usage; C) Attitudes towards posts about English language learning, D) Topics viewed on Instagram and VKontakte. The aim of the questionnaire was to identify the most attractive and popular topics among our respondents for further implementation into the video classes of the marathon.

The participants were 467 male (22,3%) and female (77,7%), aged: 17- 25 – 91,6%; 26-35 – 3,9%; 36 – 45– 2,8%; over 45 – 1,7%.

The second stage was designing and launching the marathon in Language Quest free open accounts on Instagram and VKontakte. There were 9 lessons designed and edited into video format. Each class covered the topic which gained the highest score in the first stage of the research and lasted 10 minutes. The aim of the third stage was to analyze the correlation of studying English by means of Instagram and English skills development. The number of participants of the third stage varied according to statistics given on Instagram and VKontakte. There were 20 people who registered as active participants interacting with the teachers, sending their home tasks and receiving feedbacks from the teachers. Every new episode had from 90 to 124 views. These viewers could watch and do the tasks on their own without teacher's support.

The third stage was final questionnaire 2 in Google docs for those who participated in the marathon. The aim of the third stage was to prove the hypothesis that social networking sites are convenient and multi-functional platforms for interaction with students and distance learning; and online marathons are effective and highly encouraging means of English speaking skills development at university. The questionnaire included multiple choice questions and 5 open-ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into 2 main sections: A) Personal feedback on the marathon. B) Perceptions of using Instagram and VKontakte for English language learning. The overall number of the third stage participants was 115, 90 of them watched all episodes and did the home tasks but did not send them to the teacher. So the most informative responses were from those 20 who watched and interacted with the teachers.

5. Results

According to the first stage of the research (questionnaire 1) 67% of the participants use Instagram as the preferable social network and 33% - VKontakte. 90% read the posts about English language learning, 7,5% read the posts in English and 28,9% read easily in both languages. 2% of the respondents who read in English belong to the age group of 36 –45 and over. The age group 17- 26 make up the other 5,5%. These data show that the major part of the respondents are interested in the content created in English if it correlates with their sphere of interests and most of them belong to the younger generation.

The block of questions concerning attitude towards posts about English language learning shows that the audience is interested in various marathons (22,3%), competitions (22,1%), useful idioms but the most popular are - explaining the grammar difficulties (56,5%) and feedback from the teachers

(47,8%). It is evident that marathons and competitions are motivating and effective mean for learning a language as they have interactive and entertaining character.

In the same block of questions the respondents named the most popular topics they view on social networks. The table 1 illustrates that the most frequent answers are connected with travelling and usage of contemporary English language. The Russian audience shows a great demand for studying English and travelling so it is not surprising that all topics connected with learning a language such as grammar, everyday English, idioms, slang are very popular. So, they are worth using in marathon lesson (see Table.1). Food and recipes make up 32,8% of all answers which is clear as cookery shows are extremely popular among Russians of all age groups.

Table 1
Most viewed topics

Frequent answers	%
Business	10,9%
Food and recipes	32,8%
Travelling	60,6%
Contemporary English language	48,4%
World news	30,8%
Grammar rules	36,2%
International exams	1,8%
Internships	17,1%

The obtained data underlie the marathon programme and helped develop the marathon of English language *Easy Start* as a new way of interacting, teaching and motivating students to learn under the conditions of pandemia. The chosen topics proved to be of high demand for the respondents and corresponded to the first year bachelor curriculum of the English language course at Kursk State University.

The marathon was designed for elementary – pre-intermediate students, this level is widely spread among English learners in Russia but it was available for everyone. The *Language Quest* team consisting of Foreign Languages and Professional Communication department staff, teachers and Phd's filmed 9 video- lessons 10 minutes each and edited them in Movavi Video Editor.

The topics were the following:

1. Getting to know you.
2. Daily routines.
3. In the city.
4. Let's cook something.
5. Eating out.
6. What did you do yesterday?
7. What are your plans?
8. It's all about style!
9. Let's go shopping!

Each lesson covered some real-life situation, a dialogue or a story and was structured in the following way:

1. Introduction of the topic, a story or a dialogue role-played by teachers and native speakers, includes vocabulary and grammar patterns which are explained and drilled in the second part.
2. Explanation and representing some basics patterns and language structures and repeating some models.
3. Drilling includes using and repeating the patterns and models from the first and second parts of the lesson and providing their own answers.

At the end of each lesson students received their home tasks, to make voice or video recording of their stories based on the topic, which they send to the direct messages of the *Language Quest* account. Teachers responsible for the lessons watched through the students' recordings and gave

feedback with all necessary corrections and recommendations. All lessons were also equipped by extra material available on Yandex Drive.

The lessons were released three times a week during three week period and it was both effective and flexible due to the students being able to learn faster at their own pace, going back and re-watching.

A week after the marathon had finished we conducted one more questionnaire 2 to receive the feedback from the audience. Here we use the target group of twenty, as above mentioned, but the responses of the 115 respondents correlate with the target group.

The questionnaire showed that 100% of respondents found the marathon highly useful in particular for speaking practice. They gave the following responses: (72%) *I wanted to have speaking practice, It was important for me to speak, As I don't have any speaking practice in everyday life this marathon gave me a great chance to do it;* (20%) *self-development and obtaining new skills;* (8%) *just interesting and entertaining.* The majority of the respondents improved their speaking and listening skills. The teachers who watched through the videos from the students mentioned that students acted relaxed and spoke more fluently and freely with no language barriers than in the classroom. We valued their answers according to the criteria of fluency, grammar and vocabulary accuracy and coherence. The speech of the students was quite fluent and coherent but still there were some grammar mistakes which did not stop them from speaking at all. We suppose that it happens because they were not afraid of being judged by the classmates and the teacher, which proved our idea that such format can be more useful for speaking skills development than for grammar. Although 70 % of the respondents said that they understood the grammar structures while watching the marathon.

Table 2

Practical value of the marathon

Frequent answers	%
Understood grammar structures	70%
Learned new words	65%
Improved speaking skills	60%

The answers to the research question “What would you like to change or add to the marathon?” received the following responses: (70%) *The marathon was great, I wouldn't change or add anything;* (10%) *more grammar;* (15%) *more episodes of the marathon;* (5%) *more different material.*

100% of the respondents think that marathons encourage and motivate to learn languages and this kind of format must be used as a part of university courses. For example they answered: *It must be included because it's an interesting form of studying; Yes, It motivates a lot; Yes, it allows the bigger audience to get the access to English language classes.*

The multi-staged research proved our hypothesis about social networks that they are convenient multi-functional platforms providing means for interaction and learning. The majority of respondents highlighted that this format of distance learning is highly motivating, efficient and should be included into the university curriculum as it gives wider opportunities for everyone.

The research showed that the significant number of respondents read in English the posts on social nets, they are interested in travelling, world news, contemporary spoken English language and other aspects of language learning. On the accounts of language schools they are interested in interacting with the teacher, getting answers to puzzling questions about grammar, participating in marathons and competitions.

The conducted marathon, that included vital topics according to the proceeding research, allowed the participants practice their speaking skills, improve their vocabulary, gave simple and clear explanation of grammar constructions. Such form appeared to be more convenient and psychologically comfortable, as the participants willingly did their home tasks, sent their video and voice recordings to the teachers and interacted with them freely.

The survey conducted after the marathon met our expectations concerning performance and material presentation, functioning and tools, interaction with the participants and, to some extent, exceeded them. Unanimous positive answers that the marathon is interesting and promising as a new form of classes, motivates, arouses interest in knowledge, gives practical and theoretical skills in a

convenient, comfortable format, is accessible to a large number of students, allow us to conclude that it can be useful to introduce marathons into the educational process at a university in many disciplines as one of many forms of representing material.

6. Discussion

Today, many are wondering whether online education will continue its existence in the same amount after the end of the pandemic and how this will affect the educational market. Even before the pandemic, there was a rapid growth in the use of distance learning technologies. Global investment in educational technology in 2019 amounted to \$ 18.66 billion, and the total online education market is projected to reach \$ 350 billion by 2025. Since COVID-19 appeared, the use of various online learning software has grown significantly: language apps, virtual learning, video conferencing tools.

How will this change education in the future?

On the one hand, an unplanned and rapid transition to distance learning, without proper training, with poor broadband Internet access, can lead to poor experiences that will not contribute to the sustainable growth of online education. On the other hand, a new hybrid education model with significant benefits may emerge.

We believe that the integration of information technology into education will be even faster and that online education will eventually become an integral component of school and university education. Recent situation pose new challenges and new questions. Can the transition to online learning cause the creation and launching of new, more effective forms of educational process organization? While some are afraid that rapid transition to distance learning could have reduced the quality of education, others plan to make online learning a part of their “new standard”, making use of all its advantages and benefits

7. Conclusion

We believe that the creation of a hybrid educational model of teaching a foreign language will be effective and promising. The marathon was included in the curriculum of "Foreign Language" discipline, since the topics of classes and assignments correspond to the program of the 1st year of the bachelor's degree. Such approach will enable students who do not attend classes at university on different reasons, study the material online on their own. Students who have the opportunity to work in the classroom can use the marathon as an additional material.

Instagram, and probably other similar social networking sites, have the potential to help language learners to improve overall language skills in general, and vocabulary and communication skills in particular, probably because social networking platforms are easy to use anywhere, anytime. Although social networking sites may not completely replace face-to-face learning they can serve as a link between a student and a teacher in all learning environments.

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