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Challenges, Experience and Efficiency of Distance Education System Introduced in Uzbekistan's State Conservatory During Pandemic

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Introduction

For the last 20 years, distance learning has become a global phenomenon and significantly changed the structure of educational systems in many countries of the world. A whole industry of educational services has emerged and has been actively developing, united by the general name "distance education"[12; p.7] . The discourse on distance education has been attracting a great deal of attention among scholars in recent years. However, once most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic the subject attracted even greater attention. Educational institutions in 165 countries around the world have closed due to the Coronavirus outbreak, according to UNESCO [22]. Teaching online is moving on an unprecedented scale with a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for everyone. Notably, these disruptions will not just be a short-term issue, but will probably have long-term consequences for the affected population.

Research on distance education in higher educational institutions has pointed to a range of benefits and challenges associated with this mode of learning. Modern information technologies have opened up completely new opportunities and greatly expanded distance educational environments in the field of higher education. [7]. Distance education and online learning have the ability to reach a larger population, argued such authors as Burtseva, Kuznetsova, Khazanov, Ovarium, who devoted their works to the study of distance education methods of teaching, particularly in foreign languages [3; 9; 10; 15;]. The authors noted the emergence of opportunities that allowed teachers of foreign languages using various software programs to create exercises, tests that could be used in both distance and traditional face-to-face classroom teaching. The authors noted that emerging new distance projects have made education more transparent. It changed in the traditional model of teacher-student interaction [18]. Many authors stated that distance education system has significantly improved the quality of education by providing online communication between the teacher and students, enhancing students' independent work, increasing control over the course of learning and increasing motivation and

interest in learning foreign languages, as well as helping the development of creative approach both from the side of teachers and students [2; 14].

Alongside the effectiveness of distance learning, there are still some gaps, as it comes with a completely new set of problems. The main issue has been access to resources. Since one of the advantages of distance learning is the ability to access remotely educational resources via the Internet, the availability of technical means through which such access can be carried out becomes mandatory [11; p.147]. However, Barbour argued "that the factors that make a student successful using learning technologies are often connected to socioeconomic privilege" [1]. Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic showed that those with less resources have experienced considerable stress and anguish just finding a place where they could log on to the Internet or even a convenient way to communicate with their instructors [20]. Many authors argued that Internet connection and working device have been difficult to access for families who struggle to make ends meet. Sagindykova, attributed to the disadvantages of distance learning the narrowing of the potential audience due to the impossibility of technically equipping all students and teachers, as well as the inappropriate educational and methodological textbooks for distance learning [21].

Moreover, a number of researchers identified copyright infringement in the placement of materials, photographs, images as another problem of distance learning [5; 13]. Some authors noted that the new form of distance teaching did not replace full-time education, though supplemented it by deepening and expanding the students' knowledge provided by the program. Thus, Odaryuk I.V. expressed doubts about the enormous possibilities of mastering a foreign language using distance learning methods, as this process has had its own peculiarities associated with learning various types of speech activity. She argued, "Learning to read and write does not require sound, whereas when teaching pronunciation, speaking and listening, it is necessary. Moreover, teacher's control is also required when creating and correcting various students' oral statements" [15; p.159].

Another disadvantage of using information technology for distance interaction in education is the relatively low mobility in the formation of the course. As Boronenko T. A noted, "various types of testing are often used to test the knowledge, and identifying their effectiveness has been difficult in the framework of distance learning" [2; p.132] Marchuk N. further stated:

"…that when teaching using modern technologies the ways of perceiving information are changing, the arsenal of methods of influence is reduced, which necessitates an increase in the quality and intensity of the impact of the remaining methods of presenting information. For example, the role of infographics in education is growing, and the requirements for the quality of its creation are increasing" [14; p. 22].

No doubts that teaching the discipline "foreign language" remotely is a difficult task, since the discipline includes not only knowledge of the language, but also practice and adaptation are needed, which are equally necessary in a distance-teaching format. Each teacher should select good literature that would help to study new material, and post links to various textbooks on the topic on the discipline portal. Therefore, the format of distance learning is effective only in the case of a competent approach. There are ready-made platforms with all the necessary built-in tools for distance teaching, many of which are free. The most common distance teaching platforms are Moodle, Sakai, LOTUS Learning Space, eFront, and others.

The methodology of teaching foreign languages suggests three main traditional stages of work on grammar material: the stage of familiarization and primary consolidation, the stage of training and the stage of applying the grammatical structure in speech [21; p. 274]. Very often, the main difficulty in teaching grammar lies not in memorizing the facts of the language, but in mastering the skills to apply them in communication. Since a foreign language is not only a theoretical, but mainly practical science, for the further consolidation of the acquired skills, students need a lot of practice, not only written, but also oral, which is quite problematic in distance learning, since during the lesson it is quite challenging for the teacher to interview every student while online. On the other hand, a number of

researchers noted that a decrease in the contact work between students and a teacher in a number of cases can play a positive role, since "the student's shyness and uncertainty disappear, which manifests itself during direct contact" [2; p. 132]. In addition, factors such as unlimited time to study the material and its practice, the ability to repeatedly re-read and revise theoretical material, immediately see their mistakes after sending the assignment and analysis of the most difficult moments in practice with a teacher, allow students to significantly increase their effectiveness.

The leading component in teaching foreign languages at the higher educational establishments is such activities as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In the course of distance learning of foreign languages, the work of students should be organized in such a way that they autonomously, while supervised by a teacher, perform all possible types of activities. In the course of reading, each student must read and practice this type of an activity independently. In the case when the purpose of the training is to study the rules of reading, the content of the educational reference book should include the rules for reading letters and letter combinations, exercises for applying these rules when reading individual words and sentences [8]. When the goal of training is to teach comprehension skills while reading foreign language literature, it becomes necessary to think over various options for controlling the level of comprehension. Testing, questions, retelling and many other tasks can be used for evaluation. In the course of reading comprehension, students must comply with the requirements of the manual developed in advance by the teachers, keep diaries, which will reflect the work done on the texts, questions for the teacher, answers to the questions of the teacher, fulfillment of assignments [6]. In teaching listening, along with the use of audio tools, the videos should also be used, containing a number of extra linguistic and contextual keys, as well as showing some important visual elements to comprehend. The ability to stop and re-listen or assess that material has a positive effect, which allows students to process sounds and images, and better understand audio materials. Computers in multimedia configuration play an important role in teaching the understanding of foreign languages by ear in distance learning.

In distance education, teaching spoken and written speech is carried out through the implementation of communication between a group of students and a teacher. If the implementation of teaching writing skills is carried out through e-mail, chats, synchronous communication, then teaching speaking in distance learning is possible only through teleconferences [6]. For example, one need to combine video, audio, images, and text.

Carrying out communication processes, teachers must provide students with all types of activities: learning vocabulary, teaching grammar and teaching phonetics. Learning to write should not be ignored in distance education. The study of vocabulary should be supervised by a teacher using electronic textbooks and manuals, as well as specially designed exercises and tasks for self-control and evaluation. Teaching grammar should be carried out with the provision of students with access to various sources of didactic language information, dictionaries, textbooks, grammar reference books. Phonetics training should be carried out in stages, along with mastering theoretical material. At the practical stage, pronunciation, intonation, and speed of speech must be practiced. Developing new technologies is crucial to allow teaching phonetics in distance education with direct communication between the student and the teacher, in order to be able to get feedback, which provides the ability to hear the student's pronunciation, and correct it. Video and audio conferences on-line makes this process manageable.

Developing speech skills has been highly complicated to achieve in distance education. If written speech requires a teacher's check, then the development of speaking skills requires direct participation in conversation or its direct observation. For example, to reduce incorrect pronunciation or when memorizing speech turns. The development of speaking skills requires the presence of a teacher; however, the classes in an online group are difficult to manage, while individual support is time consuming. All this dictates the need to adapt to high-speed information technology in order to prepare for active independent professional activity. The proper organization of the distance learning process itself plays a huge role in providing knowledge and skills. Since distance learning is a relatively new

method in most universities in Uzbekistan, the process of organizing and building the system of education is a real test for the level of knowledge and competence of teachers. As Polat indicated '"difficulties arise, since it is necessary not only to appropriately submit the material in foreign languages, but also to make sure how deeply students master the material" [16; p. 31].

Dealing with the crisis in Uzbekistan State Conservatory (USC). Due to the epidemiological situation in the country, all universities in the country were forced to urgently switch to distance education system. For many universities in Uzbekistan, especially those ones with blended approach to education, switching to full-time distance education, in a view of recent events, have brought almost zero changes to their learning process. However, for the USC's staff the closure caused quite a shock and a big disruption in education routine. For both teachers and students of the USC, this was something new, given the specifics of musical education. Thus for some specialties (piano, orchestra, vocals, etc.), online teaching has been something incomprehensible and hardly feasible. The specificity of learning in musical education institution means fundamental difference between distance learning and full-time education in the form of presentation of the material, ways of interaction between the teacher and the student. Therefore, the teaching staff as well as students have faced several challenges associated with implementation of distance education. As a result of sudden shift to online education, teachers have rushed to prepare distance-learning tools while students began to adjust to the abrupt closure of the institute. Teachers started conducting face-to-face classes on online meeting platforms, such as Zoom, Telegram, and further adopted the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning (MOODLE) for the online teaching. Even such subjects as music, dance and physical education classes have suddenly been now conducted online in USC. Not everyone was able to manage everything as skillfully as the younger generation. Therefore, it was necessary to train additionally teachers and students in the use of Internet resources, and this, in turn, should have taken a certain amount of time and resources. In addition, there was such an obstacle as the technical side of educational portals and platforms,

which could not withstand such an inflow even if the systems kept working; it was slow, which also complicated the educational process.

The teachers and students of the USC shared their views on challenges they faced when switching to distance education.

The main problems faced by teachers and students in the transition to this type of education was the lack of computers, access to the Internet, and elementary poor connection, especially in remote areas of the country. Students from Kashkadariya, Karakalpakistan, Fergana Valley to name a few, struggled to access the internet. For many families affected by COVID, food on the table has been a bigger issue than access to home technology. With a limited number of computers per family, sharing created additional challenges for those with multiple siblings. One of the students of the conservatory wrote:

"Distance learning is very convenient; you can go to work not thinking about being late for class. The only drawback is paid Internet, and due to the fact that the country is quarantined and there is no financial support for citizens, not everyone can pay for internet traffic. "

Given that remote learning is the only option we have right now – a strong and reliable internet connection has never been more important. Other students noted that there was often connection failure, mainly for those living in remote areas and they had to show miracles of ingenuity in order to complete tasks on time. Further they spoke about all the things they missed about going to the institute such as their friends, teachers, and extracurricular activities, even the socializing in cafeteria.

Others recounted the challenges of distance learning, from struggling to understand assignments and getting easily distracted to not having reliable connection. Though, some students have discovered that they enjoyed getting to work at their own pace, set their own schedule and being free from the loud and stressful environment of school. Many argued that even if all negative issues were eliminated switching completely for distance education would not be correct. Being units of society students and teachers need live communication. People need to see

emotions face-to-face, not just through the screens of the gadgets. Thus, as one of the USC students shared:

"Distance learning is much worse than full-time education; because it is quite different from when you sit at a lecture, where you ask questions, communicate with your teacher. In general, we get too much homework to do in all subjects… from a lot of work, writing, our eyesight becomes bad. …If the teacher does not see the student face-to-face, they cannot see most of the mistakes, even if they decide to stop the student and correct them, it is quite a story. Moreover, not everyone can have high-speed Internet so that the picture is not blurred, and does not freeze, which makes it hard to listen to properly. It's frustrating that there is no live communication."

"When students feel connected to their classroom community (i.e. they feel like they are cared for as individuals and with their learning), they are more likely to succeed academically", argued Chertoff [4]. When learning activities are suddenly and completely switched online, students can experience feeling overwhelmed and unmotivated. They struggle to understand what to do and where to start, and how to approach learning from a distance.

The USC teaching staff on the other hand, embraced the distance education, though a great deal of pressure has been put on teachers to make up for the lost instruction time and to deliver online learning. From the teacher's point of view there have been a number of issues that needed to be addressed. Though the effectiveness of using distance education to optimize the educational process has been obvious.

The teachers of the "Uzbek and Foreign Languages" department of the USC shared their techniques on how they have been managing the distance education, and how they tried to motivate students during period of adaptation to the new system, and what they could do to succeed with online learning, to make this transition to full-time remote education smoother. Many argued that the new concept of teaching a foreign language has been based on the use of interactive techniques that facilitated the interaction of students with each other and with the teacher, ensuring the activity of all participants in the educational process. This increased the effectiveness of

education. The success of the design and implementation of distance learning in grammar of a foreign language largely depends on the correct methodological approach, the introduction of new techniques and technologies, as well as on the motivation coming from the students themselves. The distance teaching opened possibilities to solve the problems of the lack of time and the effectiveness of teaching the grammar of a foreign language, especially during the training stage of the studied grammar material.

Moreover, problems arose in the use of resources (portals, different platforms, file formats, sending them, etc.) by both students and teachers. The USC introduced MOODLE and used it as a central hub for all subjects. This learning management system was easy for students to log in and start learning. However, for the teaching staff instructions that are more precise were needed. Many needed more training since they lacked skills to use properly the multiple forms of software that they were supposed to use to continue teaching during the crisis. Therefore, additional learning was also suggested, however, it was difficult to implement during quarantine. Teaching staff was advised to use such tools as uploading teaching materials to YouTube so that students could effectively master the material. Flipgrid – to recording the students' responses. Zoom - a video-conferencing application, to conduct video calls with multiple people but also to record video, voice and share the screen, Free ESL Resource Library - worksheets, games, and lessons to print out and sent home to student or uploaded to google classroom to name a few.

Since all distance teaching systems base learning methods on the independent gaining of knowledge the reduction for work with the teacher was obvious. The interviewed teachers noted that in the classroom, with direct contact with the students, the course of the lesson could be adjusted when a difficult task for the current lesson arose, devoted more time to working on the topic or gave additional homework to work out the topic. With distance learning, the immediate evaluation of the tasks may be difficult, adjusting the course of the lesson is often impossible. Some teachers included the laboriousness of drawing up assignments and maintaining the motivation of students to the difficulties in the implementation

of distance education. Many teachers of USC had to urgently think over the structure, content, design of the course, and ways of interaction with students, the structure of knowledge assessment for the on-line course despite the fact that they had a clear idea about the course, its goals and objectives for full-time education. The process of preparing this kind of courses required certain technical skills, thorough work on creating a course template from scratch. Such work differs from the traditional one, and if the content of a textbook or test mechanically transferred to a form for remote education, then as a rule, a weak result occurred, and students to gain negative experience, which hardly contribute to the students' motivation to keep learning. Therefore, the creation of distance courses, tests or just assignments must have been approached with great responsibility and thought through every step.

Another challenge occurres from the fact that students with different levels of language proficiency often come to the same group, since a foreign language in USC is not a major and is not included in the entrance exams. Traditionally, universities divide students into subgroups depending on the level of language proficiency. However, the division into groups in the USC is barely possible due to the fact that the groups are formed within the framework of directions by major specialties, and not according to the level of language knowledge. A very important fact was the building of communication during distance learning and the number of students in the group. Up to 12 people is the optimal number, however, many teachers had to include up to 25 students in a group, which complicated the lesson course. If students received an assignment to prepare an oral message at home, it was problematic to interview each student during the video conference, and to conduct a dialogue, since other students were left out. Many teachers faced the fact that in a large group of participants it was hard for teachers to give individual feedback to the students. Moreover, if learners tried to express simultaneously their opinion or question, no one was heard at all. To minimize negative effects the students were to ask questions in the conference chat. Unfortunately, neither the students nor the teachers had the opportunity to work individually. Therefore, the rest of the students had to be given to complete the written assignment and leave

questions on the assignment in the conference chat. While the written assignment had to be checked afterwards. It is important for teachers to use platforms where it is possible to unite students into session rooms, where they can perform an assignment online in pairs (for example, prepare for a discussion and think over a presentation strategy). When organizing distance learning, it is very important for the teacher at the very beginning of the online classes to talk to the group about the rules of conduct during distance lessons, which was problematic because full-time training was interrupted unexpectedly.

According to USC teachers working online during the quarantine showed that the organization of teaching a foreign language in a distance format required high labor costs at the first stages of creating a course, since tasks should have been accessible for students of all levels of knowledge. When constructing a distance lesson, various factors should have been taken into account. Modern technologies simplified the task of evaluation and automated the process, allowing the computer to check the material. The use of prepared presentations and tables helps a lot when explaining the new material. In this case, the teacher can ask students to read the example in turn, comment on the rule so that the explanation is not monotonous. Teachers appreciated the importance of recording a video lecture on a language discipline, as it was noticed that the perception process went much better if a student saw and heard their teacher, even if it was just a video and not an online format.

As can be seen from the experience, the organization of this type of education is labor-intensive and requires a complete revision of the format of the tasks performed. Today, students and teachers must jointly overcome the problems that the transition to a new level of education poses for them.

While most above guides focus on educators and how to make them more productive, students should not be forgotten as they could do better with more help in creating good studying habits. It is well known that strict self-discipline is required from students, and the result depends on the independence and consciousness of the student. With this teaching system, students are tempted to postpone work until later,

go through the postponed material that accumulates in large volumes, etc. One student confessed frankly that he asked friends to help him with his homework.

First and foremost, students are advised to establish a daily routine for their own wellbeing. For those students who do not have the ability to manage effectively their time a little extra motivation is needed. Thus, students should plan accordingly when assignments are due, when to join video calls or online discussions and generally, how to be kept organized. The learning environment has a huge impact on productivity and concentration. That is why it is important to advise students on how to eliminate distractions as much as possible. Students probably need more guidance on how to enroll in online classes, where to find lessons, how to use the collaboration tools, how to access online assignments, how to see their grades, etc. From the beginning, students should be clarified on how to get support in the online environment and make it clear that they will receive feedback for their work through personalized comments on assignments, via video conferences, explore how to get feedback through voice messages, etc. In order to achieve productivity and avoid burnout students should be advised to practice spaced repetition, distribute their learning throughout the day, and organize hosting sessions in which they can interact with peers in order to further discuss what they have learned. During the Zoom conferencing, students should stick to some ground rules such as: be on time, listening to one another, waiting for a turn to speak, ask only relevant questions. Students should be encouraged to ask for help whenever they encounter a hurdle in their learning process. To make the education process effective they should be encouraged to discuss what they would need in order to learn better at home, since they even can come up with their own ideas on how to make this transition to online learning easier.

In conclusion, it should be noted that despite the fact that there are still many unresolved issues, such as the difficulty in implementation of the development of all four types of speech activity: listening, speaking skills, reading, writing, and the fact that not all educational platforms provide exercises for speaking skills and listening. The lack of communication tasks will have a bad effect on the formation

of a number of skills. In addition, one cannot fail to mention technical equipment with Internet access, not everyone has it. Spending most of the time at the computer can also affect the health of students. Accordingly, the quality of knowledge will decline.

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that despite the advantages of the latest multimedia and computer technologies in distance education, collective cognitive activity is an indispensable part, which allows to correctly perceive others.

However, in the current circumstances, there is no other way out, like using all available resources, shifting to distance education, since distance learning has the ability to teach students all types of speech activity, as well as to form communicative competence, which is the main goal of teaching foreign languages.

With the introduction of distance education, students and teachers have already begun to master many interesting programs and applications through which they can organize teaching a foreign language to the extent that it is urgently needed now. Therefore, distance learning should be viewed as an important perspective. The advantages of distance learning are flexibility regarding the time and place of organizing educational activities, and instant confirmation of completed assignments.

Although at the moment there is still no comprehensive approach to the creation of a distance learning system and targeted professional training of pedagogical personnel who are proficient in e-learning methods and distance educational technologies. But with the active use of information technologies and the active participation of the student on the one hand, and clear principles for selecting the content of the material, methods of adapting their use, on the other, problems can be minimized. With the competent development of the technical aspects of distance education, with regular and professional support of trainees throughout the course, with high motivation of students and the availability of all the necessary technical teaching aids and electronic educational resources, distance education can compete with traditional forms of education.

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