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Target Language Teaching by Means of E-Learning: A Case Study

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Abstract: The article reveals the implementation of innovative e-learning technologies in the process of mastering the discipline "Target language of the professional use" by students of agricultural universities. The presented e-learning training course is an innovative tool that provides study of educational material in the mode of independent work with a computer as well as regulates the interaction of students with a teacher. Such online collaboration contributes to the improvement of the efficiency of target language knowledge formation through the introduction of upgraded teaching educational materials; stimulates interest in the study of target languages using innovative information and communication technologies; responsiveness of the feedback and the possibility of direct consultation with the teacher in the educational environment of the Moodle platform. The analysis of the results of the experimental survey showed predominantly sufficient and high levels of knowledge of students from the experimental groups who were trained by means of the electronic course; in contrast to the low and initial levels of knowledge of students from the control groups. Particular attention is paid to the characteristics of the content, structure and tasks of the electronic training course on learning English, German, Ukrainian and Russian as target languages for distance learning students of Sumy National Agrarian University.

Keywords: *Information and communication technologies; the Moodle educational platform; students of agricultural universities; target language.*

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1. Introduction

In today's global society many students of agricultural universities are facing the challenge of accessing various academic mobility programs in a language other than their mother tongue, to learn about the current achievements and inventions in their professional field from foreign language sources, to satisfy cognitive interests and needs in contemporary international politics, law, ethics, culture study, psychology, etc. So they learn the discipline "Target language of the professional use".

According to modern education terminology, target language is a language that is foreign for a learner, a language that a nonnative speaker is acquiring in the process of learning (Longman, 2019). Target languages, learnt in Sumy National Agrarian University, Ukraine, are the English and German languages for the Ukrainian students, the Ukrainian and the Russian languages for the international students (SNAU, 2019).

The discipline "Target language of professional use" is aimed to help students who master agrarian professions to adapt to modern socio-economic relations and to develop international contacts, to stimulate motivation for achieving ambitious goals, to provide orientation in society social norms and intercultural communication; it even contributes to self-regulation basis of emotional stressful experiences of a personality (Bilotserkovets & Berestok, 2019).

Many students who are employed during their studies or live abroad, choose distant learning as a form of their education. To enable these students to fully participate in both the academic and social aspects of university life, educators needed to find ways to support their target language development. Such circumstances caused the introduction of the innovative e-learning and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in accordance with the Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine "Regulations on distance learning" (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2013).

A number of Ukrainian scientists were involved in the study of the issue of information and communication technologies implementation in the system of domestic higher education. Profound classification of online learning technologies implemented in the Ukrainian higher education was presented by V. Bykov (2005), who proved that ICTs were essential for educational purposes of Ukrainian higher school as they enabled increasing the amount of training materials, as well as made those materials more interesting, that significantly influenced the efficiency of target language learning. Students formed their target language knowledge being actively

engaged in the academic process, gaining new knowledge through online resources, assimilating the new and already learned content. The application of electronic resources helped to create an environment where students could eagerly ask questions; the knowledge formation was carried out by constructing situations that were maximum close to the real life (Bykov, 2005).

The use of the educational environment Moodle was proved to gain the following significant advantages, such as: accessibility (the possibility of access to education of various social groups); flexibility (the ability of learners to study in a convenient time and in a convenient place); modularity (the ability to form an individual training program, which consists of a set of independent module courses); parallel (learning simultaneously with professional activity, without interruption from other kinds of activity); profitability (cost savings of material, financial and human resources due to the use of technologies of open education) (Gubina, 2015).

It was found out that the self-control and the self-evaluation of a student and a teacher were significantly improved after the individual learning by means of the platform Moodle education resources (Tomilina, 2013). The factors that influenced the positive perception of the Moodle platform by the Ukrainian educators were considered to be the following: the possibility of expanding the scope of educational services and the use of a personality-oriented approach in teaching students at all stages; the realization of tasks of the academic process with the help of qualitative educational materials in electronic form and as a means of the automated control (Trius, 2012).

It was noted that the implementation of the Moodle platform for teaching target languages at higher educational institutions provided the efficient organization of the academic process. This communicative platform in a multichannel environment supplied the means of training, the system for monitoring and evaluating students' learning activities by providing individualization of students' agenda and free access to numerous e-resources (Forostyuk, 2017). Educators who teach target languages by means of the Moodle platform are able to create their own programs and electronic courses taking into account the latest psycholinguistic studies as well as current achievements in the sphere of ICTs for the formation of humanitarian knowledge and various linguistic competencies (Drach, 2018).

The complete transition from traditional distance learning to electronic distance learning was taking place gradually. In 2016 a center for distance learning in Sumy National Agrarian University, Ukraine, was created to implement innovative e-learning technologies within the educational

platform Moodle. Distance e-learning courses were created and presented on the site of distant education center, among them disciplines for mastering target languages (English, German, Ukrainian, Russian) of professional and business use. The term of a discipline study is determined depending on its complexity, the training materials are separated into modules, each of them finishes with a test and the study of a course completes with taking control tests and getting the Certificate (SNAU, 2019).

So, the educators of Sumy National Agrarian University have faced the issue of surveying in practice the efficiency and the necessity of distant e-learning in comparison with the traditional distant education, in this particular case, target language knowledge formation by means of e-learning has been under review.

2. Research Methodology

A case study of the efficiency of target language knowledge formation by means of electronic training course "Target language of the professional use" within the Moodle platform was conducted on the basis of Sumy National Agrarian University, Ukraine.

The components of the experimental research of the efficiency of target language knowledge formation by means of e-learning in comparison with the traditional distant learning were as follows: participants of the educational process (educators and students), normative base (teaching-methodical plans, work programs), material and technical support (hardware, telecommunication, software), open educational resources (electronic libraries and the database of Sumy National Agrarian University), types of educational work (training sessions, project assignments, practical training, control activities etc.).

The experimental survey had the following tasks:

1. To find out if the level of target language knowledge of the experimental groups students would change significantly due to application of ICTs into their academic process.

2. To get to know distant students' opinions and attitudes towards the implementation of electronic training course for target learning teaching.

The experimental survey was carried out in two experimental groups (EG), consisting of 66 students and two control groups (CG), consisting of 64 students; in total 130 participants aged 21-30, who studied first and second year at different faculties as distant students during 2018-2019 in the university. At the initial stage a preliminary knowledge tests were held, that allowed to determine the baseline data of the target language knowledge

level of EG and CG students. It was concluded that the students of EG and CG were in equal positions having approximately the same knowledge levels.

Target learning teaching in EG was based on the platform Moodle, students of CG studied target languages in the form of traditional lectures and individual forms of learning.

The electronic training course "Target language of the professional use" consisted of introductory part, two content modules, final certification and consultations in the form of chats.

The introductory part includes a presentation data for the course (creation date, authors, requirements for the program setup), a work program, a training schedule, methodological recommendations for the study of learning material (stages of work with the electronic course, series of exercises, instructions on the implementation of creative tasks, a rating scale, printed and Internet sources, a glossary (a dictionary that contains lexical units from the learning materials), announcements.

The training material is divided into two content modules, each of them contains theoretical material (electronic tutorial, multimedia presentations of lectures, audio and video teaching materials, video presentations of lectures); practical works for which a subsystem of exercises was created for the formation and activation of target language lexical and grammar knowledge, skills and abilities supported with the methodical recommendations for their implementation. The following block contains tasks for independent work, namely: individual tasks, criteria for their evaluation as definite forms of teacher interaction with students, selected forms of feedback. In addition, this approach provides the adaptability of educational materials (the choice of complexity level, volume, format of data presentation: text, audio, video and options for their combination, sequence of tasks, time to do them).

Such a precise structure of the training material is considered to be necessary as the separation of the training material into the blocks – modules – facilitates students' process of studying this material in the mode of independent work with a computer as well as allows to regulate interaction between a student and a teacher. Besides, the implementation of hypertext transitions during the development of the electronic training course is supposed to provide the separation of the learning content into topics.

The mastering of the training material is completed by modular control, which contains a set of tests to determine the level of knowledge acquisition with those that vary in complexity according to the principle from simpler to more complex and in scope. At the final stage, students

undergo a final certification, which consists of multi-level tasks, with the possibility to objectively evaluate the initial and final level of target language knowledge. In addition, the electronic course contains a block "Consultation", in the form of chat, which provides direct contact between teachers and students and enables them to work in a dialogue interaction.

It should be noted that the electronic resource for the study of this discipline was formed and implemented by the teachers of the foreign languages department, who had taken special courses and trainings for improving their own information and computer competencies.

The study of the discipline on the basis of the electronic course (in EG) took place during two semesters, then a final check of EG students' target language knowledge was made for comparative analysis with the level of CG students' target language knowledge.

Tests, oral answers, results of complex control works were used for the experimental diagnostics. Quantitative processing of the results of exercises, oral and written answers was carried out according to the ratio of knowledge developed by S. Poplavskaya (Poplavskaya, 2009), which was calculated according to formula:

$RK = (a + b + c)/3$ in which

RK – ratio of knowledge, a – systematic, b – volume, c – efficiency.

To bring the data into numerical form the method of scaling was used as follows:

5 points meant a high level of formation of the defined qualities of target language knowledge,

3 – sufficient level,

1 – low level,

0 – initial level.

The following conditions were taken into consideration: if $3,67<RK\leq5$, the level of the knowledge formation is high; if $2,33<RK\leq3,67$, the knowledge formation corresponds to the sufficient level; $1<RK\leq2,33$ – the level of knowledge is low; 1<or = RK – the level of knowledge formation is initial.

To compare the results obtained in EG and CG, the following formula was used:

$$t = \sqrt{\frac{P_1-P_2}{\frac{P_1*q_1}{N_1}+\frac{P_1*q_2}{N_2}}}$$ where

P_1, P_2 – percentage; q1, q2 – corresponding $100-P_1$, $100-P_2$.

N_1, N_2 – quantity of the objects under the experiment. If $t > 2$, so there is a significant difference, if $t < 2$, so there is no significant difference. If $t > 3$, so the difference is definitely reliable (Poplavskaya, 2009).

3. Research Results

The comparison of the indicators of the knowledge formation levels in experimental groups confirmed the sufficient (45 per cent) and the high (21 per cent) levels of knowledge in target languages (34 per cent of students had the low level); in contrast to the predominantly low (38 per cent) and the initial (31 per cent) levels in control groups (20 per cent of students had the sufficient level of target language knowledge, 11 per cent of students were determined as having high level of knowledge).

Such a difference was explained by increased productivity and efficiency of the academic process; grown interest in learning a target language; the efficiency of feedback due to the use of the electronic training course on the discipline "Target language of the professional use". The percentage and quantity data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Target language knowledge levels of EG and CG students before and after the survey

Groups	**Experimental groups, % (66 students)**				**Control groups, % (64 students)**			
Levels	Before the survey		After the survey		Before the survey		After the survey	
High	7 %	5	21 %	14	8 %	5	11 %	7
sufficient	25 %	16	45 %	30	20 %	13	20 %	13
Low	38 %	25	34 %	22	42 %	27	38 %	24
initial	30 %	20	0	0	30 %	19	31 %	20

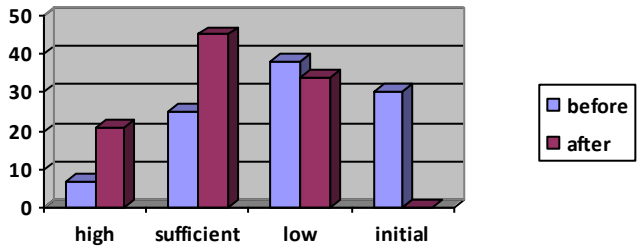

Figure 1. Comparison of target knowledge formation levels in EG before and after the survey

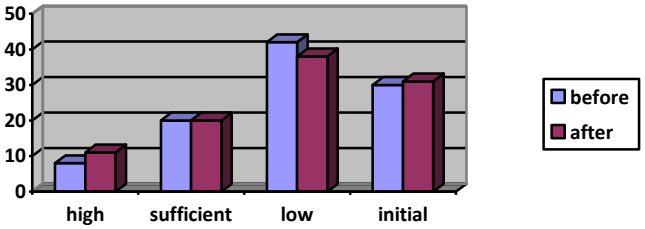

Figure 2. Comparison of target knowledge formation levels in CG before and after the survey

To fulfill the second task of the survey a series of the interviews were hold with EG distant students who were asked to express their attitude towards the electronic training course on the discipline "Target language of the professional use" they had studied with.

Most students (88,7 per cent) reported that they had been greatly satisfied with their participation in study by means of e-learning technologies that had increased their motivation for learning. 92 per cent students said that the innovative form of learning had stimulated great interest in foreign professional issues they majored in, due to updated and authentic target language training materials and resources. The students recognized that the application of the latest technological achievements was very attractive and practical, because they preferred combining learning with applying digital gadgets (laptops, smartphones, computers) in everyday life (87 per cent).

Furthermore, analysis of the students' answers about their target language learning with the electronic language course on the Moodle

platform allowed to single out the following points that had contributed to their positive perception of this e-learning tool:

- a detailed analysis of possible lexical and grammar mistakes in accordance with each separate block of the course provided by chat (78 per cent);
- audiovisual, multimedia and other linguistic content related to their future professional activity that had been taken from authentic sources (89 per cent);
- consideration of students' previous cognitive experience, on the basis of which the training materials for the electronic course had been compiled (91 per cent).

Consequently, the analysis of the results of the study showed that the use of the educational platform Moodle provided effective target language knowledge formation facilitating the access for distant students of agricultural universities to quality training materials; individualizing the academic process in accordance with the needs and abilities of students; applying modern psychological, pedagogical and information and communication technologies; enabling constant feedback from the teacher and control under the quality of the gained knowledge.

4. Discussion

Although applying e-learning technologies into the process of teaching target languages in Sumy National Agrarian University has been proven to be successful, still the issue is controversial as originally Moodle has not been created as a tool for language learning (Moodle Docs, 2019). Despite of its numerous advantages and advanced learning methods, it also meets negative reactions of students and teachers worldwide, who deal with mastering target languages.

Recent surveys show that the majority of students (95 per cent) think that the availability of learning materials due to Moodle is a great advantage and as well as the possibility to get extra credits (83 per cent of respondents). But, at the same time, teachers have reported on the negative reaction from those students, who are not eager to fulfill all types of the activities developed in the Moodle platform, especially those which require academic skills to analyze, compare and annotate (75 per cent), as well as to do peer review (more than 60 per cent). It was stated that the reason was that the students had lacked skills for self-study and independent activity (Rymanova, Baryshnikov & Grishaevac, 2015).

But we join the opinion that working with Moodle enables students to develop self-discipline and habits to work independently with a target language learning materials, that includes recognizing the need for separate self-study without the help of a teacher; to develop the ability to learn through the integration of formal (regular courses and content uploaded on the Moodle platform) and informal learning outside the classroom and beyond the control of the teacher. Individual work with the electronic training course on target language teaches students to know how to orientate themselves in the general problem, choose the basic means they need, for example, for the preparation of the creative assignments, such as projects, blogs, recording, web quests, case studies (Boćković, Gajić & Tomić, 2014). Besides, mastering different languages by means of ICTs as information, communication and knowledge formation tools implies digital competence development as well as acquires critical thinking skills (Staker & Horn, 2012).

Furthermore, as it had been found out by the other pedagogical experiment, that the students had claimed it more difficult to organize themselves alone and to save some time for learning English alone by the platform Moodle than to attend lectures and participate in team work. Moreover, students had wished more personal contact, pointing out the slow interaction with their teachers when using e-learning technologies (Gluchmanova, 2016).

Another significant disadvantage was thought to be the impossibility to participate in group discussions about a certain topic from the platform, as well as the impossibility to share opinions and to take part in foreign language discussion with their group-mates (Knežević, 2012).

Latest surveys prove that this problem can be solved by using chats. Students enjoy the opportunity to meet live in a chat; and being able to communicate with a teacher and their group-mated directly without a delay in time that fosters a positive atmosphere in the group and a feeling of togetherness. At the same time, students are less reluctant to chat (i.e. write) with each other than to talk (Husar, & Duplakova, 2016). The students who had taken part in the survey reported that using ICT opened up new channels of communication and collaborative work with teachers and group-mates, encouraging learner motivation and active participation towards learning, developing teacher-learner assessment and feedback processes. They also viewed ICTs as tools that contributed to their professional development and improved digital competence, welcoming reflective and inquiry-based practice into the academic process. (Pegalajar Palomino, 2018).

The latest experimental survey has found out that teachers should use ICTs, so they will be more connected to their students; teachers, in their turn, believe that ICTs are relevant to millennial students because they use smartphones, computers, and the Internet for daily basis (Mukminin, Habibi, Muhaimin, Haryanto & Setiono, 2019). The very knowledge that their work is monitored and overseen by someone seems to motivate students to work much harder to complete the desired task (Bielousova, 2015).

Furthermore, the significant advantages of English language learning by Moodle, have been considered by students to be the possibility of using multimedia tools, the possibility of using the platform anytime and anywhere, numerous tests for self-evaluation, good organization and transparency of the platform, easily available material for exams preparation, and the possibility of quick search of the teaching materials, that is especially essential for those students who are employed or live abroad and have no possibilities of personal contact with their teachers (Mikulan, Legac & Siročić, 2011).

Current surveys also point out that in vocational schools, ICTs (electronic courses within the Moodle platform in particular) could be used for activating and facilitating teaching and learning, saving time, and promoting individualized student-centered learning when compared with traditional teaching (Shamim & Raihan, 2016). Moreover, both students and teachers need training for profound ICTs application that includes sufficient skills of using software, websites and other tools capable of supporting the implementation of strategies and adaptations, the creation of learning environments involving latest psychological and pedagogical achievements as well as the socio-educational context. Their training should also be centered around encouraging positive attitudes and effectively transferring information to learners. This condition is considered to be crucial for the issue of ICTs implementations in the academic process to meet the teachers' requirements and the learners' characteristics and needs (Tomlinson & Wittaker, 2013).

5. Conclusions and Implications

Based on the study of scientific sources, it was concluded that in today's globalized world and multicultural environment students of agricultural universities need to develop target language knowledge – it is very important for them as they are interested in professional issues achievements taking place abroad, eager to develop the ability to carry out

logical, accurate and persuasive oral and written statements in a language that is not native for them, to acquire related language and communication competencies; vocabulary and language functions within the thematic areas on various aspects of life and from future professional activity aspects (Turnbull, & Arnett, 2002).

Also, they need to gain profound digital competencies, as they want to learn how to make interesting presentations; to participate in international academic and professional exchange programs, to promote the introduction of innovative information and communication technologies in rural areas.

Thus, these tasks can be fulfilled teaching target languages by means of distance learning courses based on the platform Moodle The survey showed the efficiency and expediency of using the e-learning course on the discipline "Target language for professional use" due to the following factors:

a) theoretical material is taught with the help of the application of a set of presentation tools (sound, graphics, video, text), maximum use of audio format; the complexity of didactic materials (involving the structure of dictionaries, editors of the text);

b) practical material is taught due to the availability of a proper sequence of exercises that form and activate the relevant language knowledge; clear separation of training and controlling exercises; ability to view, analyze and correct errors;

c) students nowadays willingly learn by means of electronic courses in the Moodle platform, because they prefer using digital gadgets, want to critically evaluate incoming information and combine it with professional target language knowledge.

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