



Implementing Digital Learning Platform in the Russian as a Foreign Language Classroom: an Instructor's Perspective

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Abstract

During the last decade, the area of Russian as Foreign Language (RFL) learning has significantly digitalized, that meets the current global trend. It is noticeable by the increased number of open educational resources for RFL learning, the online RFL courses provided by the different language centres, the rising number of the search requests on «learning Russian online», etc.

It is evident that the instructors play a key role in the process of implementing technology in the learning and teaching practice. Despite the number of studies concluding that the teachers are positive towards the integration of computer-assisted and blended language learning in general (most of the studies address the English as Second/Foreign language teaching), the specific RFL context requires separate exploration.

The current study examines challenges and perspectives of the implementation of the digital learning portal for the RFL learners and teachers called the PushkinOnline. The study addresses three main questions:

- 1) What are the instructors' expectations and preconceptions about using ICT in the RFL teaching?*
- 2) What challenges the instructors face when they use ICT (in the case of the PushkinOnline)?*
- 3) What benefits of using ICT the instructors outline from their experience (in the case of the PushkinOnline)?*

In order to answer these questions the study was conducted at the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute. It involved 12 RFL instructors and included the pre-intervention questionnaire on the instructors' attitude and expectations before using the PushkinOnline in their classroom, the intervention stage and the post-intervention questionnaire detecting the main challenges, benefits and changes in instructors' attitude after the implementation of the PushkinOnline.

1. Introduction

Recent practice exposes a growing tendency to shifting teaching of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) to the online virtual learning environment, which meets the current global trends. One of the priorities of the Russian Language Federal Targeted Program is designing and introduction of online resources for learners and tutors of RFL.

Not only development of modern training aids, but also their usage in actual practice is a matter of utmost importance. Largely, the success in meeting these challenges will depend upon how vigorously tutors will utilize the online-resources, and how much they would succeed in harmonizing those resources with educational process. The purpose of this research is to explore, from the stand of instructors, perspectives and challenges (tentative issues) affiliated with implementation of digital technologies.

In studies devoted to computer-assisted language learning (CALL), a great deal of attention was paid to an instructor role. As far back as 1992, Daud notes that along with practical arrangements regarding accessibility of gadgets and technology enhanced resources, and ICT-competence of instructors, it is important to consider such methodological aspects as how to integrate CALL into the curriculum, how to develop materials and how to teach together with the computer [1]. The above three key groups of matters in varying wording could be encountered in a number of recent CALL studies conducted from the stand of instructors [3], [2], [5].

It is evident that for the time being such factors as the lack of hardware and software as well as unavailability of other digital resources for education directly relay on a particular region. The Education at a Glance 2015 report [4] indicates that in 2015 provision of educational facilities with ICT equipment was rather sufficient; the UNESCO report indicates that recently the volume of open educational resources has been considerably increased [6].

The subject matter of technical competence of instructors, as before, continues to remain relevant. However, it is evident that in the 21 century digital literacy is being acquired routinely through the use of computers, iPads, smartphones, etc. on a daily basis. This pertains to instructors as well [4].

In this research we will drill down into two other factors having an impact on the CALL-oriented instructors: how much the instructors are all set to accept the introduction of innovations into the

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teaching/learning process and to what extent they are aware of the proper use of CALL to maximize its advantages and cope with difficulties.

2. Methodology

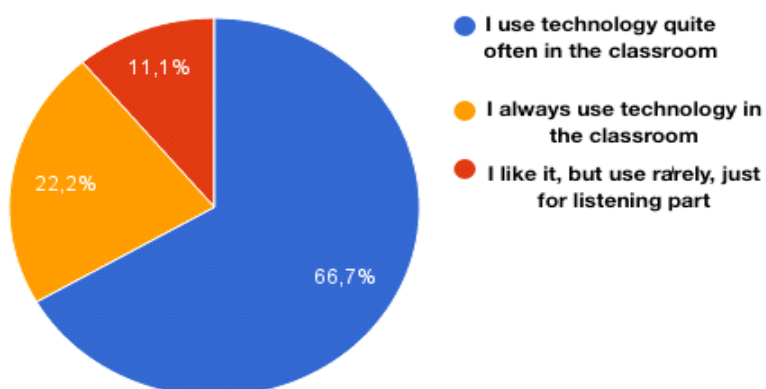
The research was conducted with the involvement of 12 RFL instructors aged 24-35 years who took part in a pilot project on the blended learning utilization at the pre-university preparatory department and during the summer RFL courses at the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute.

At the first stage, the instructors were asked to fill up a form to ascertain their expectations and their bias against the usage of the online resources for learning RFL. At the second stage, the instructors completed a training workshop on how to design blended learning course utilizing the special online resources. PushkinOnline portal (www.pushkininstitute.ru) was offered to the instructors as a basic resource. The PushkinOnline combines the online RFL courses (e-learning RFL courses from A1 to C2 levels with LMS for managing students' performance), an online school for teachers of RFL (MOOCs with tutor support) and some other services. During the intervention stage the researchers were monitoring the process of conducting Russian classes with the use of the educational resources of the portal. And at the final stage all of the project participants were interviewed.

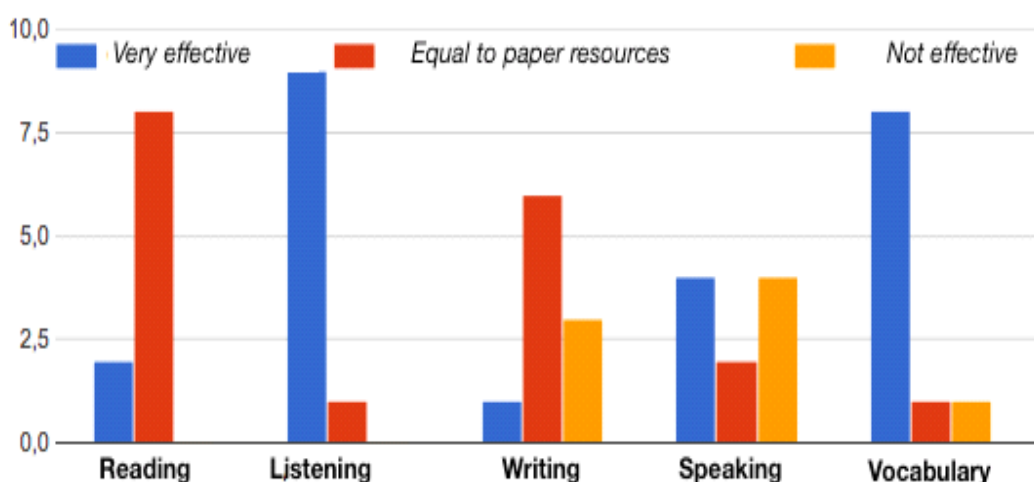
3. Results and discussion

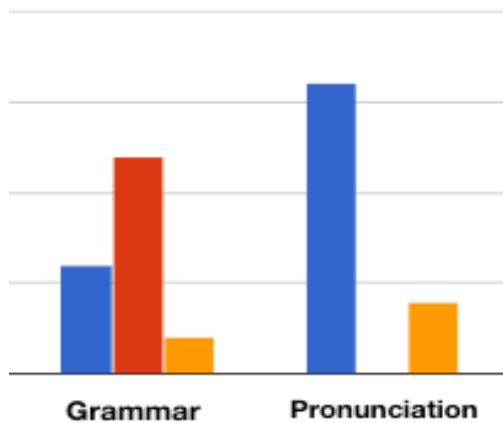
3.1. Expectations and preconceptions

The pre-intervention survey included 16 questions. The results are shown in the graphs below.



Picture 1. What do you think of the technologies utilization in Russian as Foreign Language learning?





Picture 2. Rate the effectiveness of CALL in developing language skills and units

Table 1. Likert scale questions and results in terms of average score (M) and standard division (SD).

Questions with ratings 1 low/disagree to 5 high/agree	M	SD
1. I believe that a modern lecturer should strive for integration of pedagogic technologies through combining the paper-and-pencil and digital ones.	4,9	0,32
2. I would be interested in utilizing the resources of the portal in practice to increase motivation of my students to learn.	4,3	0,67
3. I doubt that the open educational resources (OER) have sound quality.	2,6	1,17
4. I believe that utilizing the online resources will be handy in the in-class teaching. .	3,5	1,27
5. I am afraid that utilizing the portal resources in the classroom might take a toll of the studies: students keep sitting in the Internet so much anyway, but in the classroom we do need the real-life communication.	3,1	1,1
6. I am afraid that I would fail to save up to difficulties, if I would give classes utilizing the portal.	1,6	0,7
7. I believe that the self-study with the use of online resources could expedite students' progress in learning the language.	4,4	0,97
8. I will use the portal resources in my work if that allows me to assess the progress of my students more vivid.	4,5	0,71
9. I think that the portal is useless for assessment as I could not to deduce whether my students accomplished the test self-sufficiently, or not.	3	1,05
10. I think that the digital resources like the portal could save my time for preparation to the classes.	3,7	1,16
11. I think that the digital resources such as the portal could save time for conducting the assessment.	3,2	0,92
12. I believe that the digital resources such as the portal could meet the needs of different students and instructors; they are more flexible than text books.	3,6	0,84

When asked the first question regarding utilizing technologies at language classes, the instructors revealed complete unanimity: just one of them mentioned that he utilized the CALL-approach in the course of audition only. Weighting against the other results of the survey gives a good cause to believe that when asked the first question, the lecturers provided the socially-predicted response.

Picture 2 reflects the participants' expectations of the effectiveness of CALL for listening, pronunciation studies and the vocabulary building. At the same time, the lecturers' expectations of CALL efficiency in developing of other language skills turned out to be relatively low.

The results of the third part of the survey allow making an interesting observation. On the one hand the lecturers remark the importance of combination of the traditional teaching methods with the technology enhanced approaches, though at the same time they reveal their ill-preparedness in utilizing those technologies in classroom practice. To some extent this results from lack of self-confidence in utilizing modern technologies, but the key reason for that is their belief that utilization of



the online resources would take up time from "alive" communication. Just for that very reason the instructors more willingly recommend the online resources for the students' individual work (M=4.6) versus for utilizing them in the classroom (M=3.5).

The instructors also hold a controversial position regarding the efficiency of using the online resources for assessment. On the one hand the instructors acknowledge the technologies as useful for this purpose. On the other hand, their opinion, that plagiarism is more widespread in the educational online environment, hinders to acknowledge the online resources as the qualified ones for the control assessment.

Along with the above, the instructors were concerned that the OER may be of poor quality. The main advantages of the online resources were qualified as greater flexibility in comparison with hard copy educational resources, saving teachers' time in preparation for classes and assessment, positive influence on the students' motivation.

3.2. Reflection on the implementation

In the course of the pilot research the instructors taught lessons with the use of the PushkinOnline portal. It is worth mentioning that in spite of greater opportunities, some of the instructors utilized the portal resources for listening activities only (as a tape-recorder). Others used the entire scope of technical features and resources offered to them at the preliminary workshop, and taught their lessons more efficiently. Researchers recorded their observations and then verified them through interviews with the lecturers. The results of that stage of the research are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reflections on the Implementation

Problems	Number of claims	Advantages	Number of comments
1. Technical problems (failure to switch on a projector; Internet connectivity issues, etc.)	5	1. Variety of the educational content, opportunity to select the most appropriate one	8
2. Downsides of the online resource (unhandy usability; navigation, etc.)	7	2. Multimodal content: opportunity to use both text, audio and video	7
3. Ill-preparedness of students to work with the Russian language online resources	6	3. Interactive tasks, instant feedback for a student	9
4. Paucity of tasks to drill a curriculum topic	3	4. The time saved during a lesson may be used for the communicative language teaching	3
5. Difficulties in setting up studies, orchestrating the audience and time planning	5	5. Utilization of new voices, styles of pronunciation	5

Regarding the difficulties faced by the instructors, it was ascertained that the UX and UI matters are quite critical in utilizing the online resources in the educational process. The participants noticed that should a student experience difficulties with operating the online resources that resulted in wasting a great deal of time and lessening of his interest in this educational technology. In our case the users are foreign students, mostly beginners, who should be able to navigate through the portal without any language support, therefore a self-explanatory user interface turns out to be methodological problem.

One of the key reasons of ill-preparedness of students to work with Russian-language resources is the lack of typing skills in Cyrillic. Traditionally, RFL learners are being trained in Russian handwriting, but not typing, though nowadays the bulk of written communication is being conducted with the use of the typed texts. Utilizing the portal urged the necessity of developing typing skills in Russian.

The project participants have also remarked that CALL-oriented curriculum planning is much more time-consuming process.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the research revealed the instructors' attitude towards the utilizing CALL (online resources in particular) in the RFL classroom. It became obvious that the instructors should acquire and master new skills to meet the challenges of the CALL-approach in the educational process. The



results of the study will be used as a basis for the teacher training program on implementing ICT in the RFL classroom.

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