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EFL Teaching in the E-Learning Environment: Updated Principles and Methods

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to see and study the main pedagogical principles and teaching methods in a new light. Internet technologies have integrated into the process of EFL teaching and let us innovate the way we teach English. In the modern e-learning environment of any higher educational institution, updated pedagogical principles and methods have led to the efficiency of the process. The research carried out on the basis of National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (RF) showed the high-quality results of EFL teaching with the help of Web 2.0 tools.

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Keywords: Pedagogical principles; teaching methods; e-learning environment; foreign language; information and communication technologies; Internet; Web 2.0.

1. Introduction

Nowadays every individual of the society is under the influence of the ever-changing flow of information that requires analysis and efficient processing. The educational standards of the Russian Federation necessarily imply the innovative educational technologies in educational process. The integration of Web 2.0 technologies into EFL teaching practice have led to new forms of learning. It has been mainly concerned with online learning communities, which have become an integral part of the e-learning environment. Processes of informatization and technification determine the society development. Our society needs specialists who are able to flexibly adapt to rapidly changing conditions, experts with the development of critical and innovative way of thinking, who are able to generate new

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ideas and implement them in practice. Consequently, the modern system of education in Russia is in the process of reforming. One of the results is the disappearance of the contradiction between the existing high educational standards in the organization of educational process and the real state of this organization in the current educational environment of higher education institutions (Tarasova, 2015).

This article, thus, will survey and analyze the main principles and methods of EFL teaching in the conditions of the e-learning environment of the university. Major landmark in the field of EFL teaching is the development of the linguistic identity, capable of independent study of foreign language and culture, owning the necessary technology to operate large amounts of foreign language information. To train such a specialist, it is necessary to revise the basic principles and methods of EFL teaching. They need to be modernized and updated in order to reflect the integration of modern information and communication technologies into the educational process.

Within the process of informatization in education, the concept of “the e-learning environment” adequately reflects the essence of the process. In this paper we consider the e-learning environment as a set of software, hardware and teaching tools, which are aimed at the comprehensive development of students' informational, educational and foreign language communicative competence by means of a high-level information and communication technologies. At the same time one of the main aims of the e-learning environment within EFL teaching at the university is to create certain conditions for independent work of students on extraction, processing, analysis and structuring of educational information in a foreign language.

2. Methodology

2.1. Principles

The e-learning environment has such characteristics as flexibility, integrity, unlimited space for communication and asynchronous use. It can create a number of conditions promoting the effectiveness of the educational process. These conditions are: enabling the self-organization of all the members of the educational community; the availability of information resources; the ability to gather, store and share information. We have studied issues related to the organization of EFL teaching in the conditions of the e-learning environment, and came to the conclusion that, under the given conditions a number of pedagogical principles act in new ways. These principles are: the principle of openness, the principle of integrated education, the principle of consistency and systematic approach to training, the principle of interactivity, the principle of visualization and the demonstrativeness; the principle of activity; the principle of redundancy. To explore the topic, we will examine and complete the listed principles that underlie the organization of the pedagogical process of EFL teaching in the e-learning environment.

The implementation of the principle of openness in the educational process presupposes the real foreign language communication situations. Internet technology is quite contribute to the creation of the situations of this kind through the use of services such as video storage (e.g., Youtube, Teachertube, etc.), audio files (e.g., PodOmatic); Skype; virtual robots. From the methodological point of view, the openness of modern education implies the possibility of varying the educational content, various changes or clarifications to existing educational programs taking into account the changes occurring in the society. According to its characteristics, the e-learning environment is considered to be open not only for the world scientific community, but to any Internet user as well. Zaitseva (2003) defines such an openness of the environment as “the instrumental openness”, explaining that many Internet resources used as training were not originally designed for educational purposes.

Internet technologies are helping implement the principle of integrated education in the organization of EFL teaching, thanks to the diversity of their resources and services that promote integrated learning all kinds of oral activities. Taking into consideration the fact that e-learning environment is of integrative nature, it is also possible to draw a conclusion about the interaction of all the members of the educational community. This knowledge allows us to put all educational objectives into practice.

The implementation of the principle of consistency and systematic approach to training means the development of methods and techniques for training, which create clear relationship between the already studied and a new learning material. The hypertext technology is based on non-linear data submission. The uptake of content information in this format is based on associated perception. We believe that the establishment of hyperlinks between separate articles, terms and fragments contributes to the realization of this principle in the EFL classroom with using Internet services.

Technological and pedagogical characteristics of the Internet allow us to talk about the implementation of such a

principle of EFL teaching as the principle of interactivity. Modern information technologies today help all the participants of the educational process fully communicate with each other not only in a synchronous way (videoconferencing Skype) but also in an asynchronous way (forums, chats, blogs, etc.). Internet services and resources provide free Internet access to any storage media (textual, audio, and video materials) in any language.

As you organize the process of EFL training, special attention should be paid to the principle of visualization and the demonstrativeness, which helps explore the realities of the target language. Due to its characteristics such as availability and sociality, Web 2.0 provides access to a vast number of information that is diverse in form and content. With the help of hypermedia technology it has become practicable to structure and organize the learning material in various formats (text, animation, graphics, podcasts, etc.). These technologies make it possible to process more deeply and understand the studied material, contribute to a more rational organization of independent students' work.

From the point of view of traditional methodology, EFL teaching contains three types of students' activities: intellectual, emotional and verbal (Rogova, 1991). Their totality forms the basis for the implementation of the principle of activity. To achieve intellectual activity we should include methods and techniques of problem-based learning to create a need for after action review and critical thinking. Emotional activity of students is directly linked to the positive motivation to their activities, the satisfaction of the results of their learning process. To improve oral activity it is important to use a variety of modes and forms of peer-to-peer work. Internet is the optimum platform for the implementation of this principle. The use of modern information technologies of Web 2.0 is a relatively new tool in EFL teaching and significantly enhances the activity of students' learning.

The use of the principle of redundancy helps optimally stimulate the reflexive activity of learners. This means that educators use a priori excessive learning information in EFL teaching. The ability to work with the large amount of information, analyze and synthesize it for problem solving is the basis for an independent research activity of students, in other words, the practical realization of the principle of redundancy.

In the process of EFL teaching, based on the introduction of information and communication technologies, we should not lose sight of the importance of the principle of pedagogical appropriateness of using new information technologies in the educational process. The emergence of new forms of training has put the question of how much teachers need to use information technologies in the learning process. Most of them came to the conclusion that the applicability of computerization is determined by the balance between the educational, methodical, economic efficiency, and traditional forms of EFL teaching (Reeves, 2004). In fact, every teacher who is going to use modern information technologies as part of their discipline, must, first of all, know how to use them, and secondly, have a clear methodical ground of such integration, thirdly, be able, if necessary, amend or adapt existing methods and technologies.

2. 2. Teaching methods

Nowadays EFL teaching is based on a large variety of different teaching methods. Along with the traditional methods, new educational technologies are being increasingly used. The success of the educational process, in our view, depends on a competent and adequate combination of both ways of teaching. Teaching methods reflect the level of scientific and technological development of education and society in general. The advent of computer technologies in education promoted the establishment and development of new methods and allowed to expand the use of the existing ones. It is important to note that we need to strike a certain balance between the new educational technologies and traditional training methods for forming a didactic expedient educational learning environment. The main methods of EFL teaching in the e-learning environment are considered to be the following: training methods, demonstration methods, problem solving methods, team working methods, and creative research methods. The use of information and communication technologies, in our view, significantly expands the ways to implement these methods.

Implementation of the training method comes in different forms of control and self-control, including performing tests. Therefore, in our view, integration of blogging technology into the training methods of EFL teaching is a necessary condition, as a blog, due to its characteristics, is a platform for self-expression and enables the creation of the whole personality image, which is impossible to achieve with a traditional computer testing.

One of the peculiarities of the demonstration method in the context of new information technologies is the ability to present the information of any nature and in any form - text, audio, video, graphics, etc. And the use of slide presentations is at the top position. According to the authors of the manuals for teachers "Information technologies

in educational process”, multimedia presentation allows presenting educational material as a system of bright images, full of structured information in a comprehensive algorithmic order and building the educational process on the basis of the psychologically correct modes of operation of attention, memory, mental activity, reconstruction of the learning process from a position of integrity (Shevchenko, et al, 2009). The Web 2.0 service social media container, as SlideShare, gives all the members of the educational community the ability to store, share, gather, and use slide presentations in their training activities. Other services of social media containers allow showing video information (Youtube), audio information (podcasts) and graphics (Flickr, Picasa).

Problem-solving method relates to the learner-centered approach. The use of this method in the e-learning environment aimed at forming students' critical thinking, the need for reflection, activating skills of foreign language communication. Catching up on finding the necessary information, the learner must have the ability to navigate in a vast information flow, the ability to analyze, process, structure and present the information. To help succeed in this process, web-based templates are successfully used in modern pedagogy. American educators (March, 2004; Dodge, 1995; Krauss, 2000, and others) have developed web-based activities for students in formats Hotlist (a list of useful links), Multimedia Scrapbook (Multimedia Album), Subject Sampler (sample of the problem), Treasure Hunt (Hunt for wealth), WebQuest (Web search). These tasks are aimed at consistent study of any problem (starting and ending with a deep examination of it) and are based entirely on the use of information resources of the Internet. This method successfully develops students' skills of independent work with information.

Team working method is based on the use of various types of telecommunication technologies, blogs and Skype mostly. Skype is a synchronous mode of communication which has different virtual locations, allows you to chat with one as well as with many people at a time. There are the following possibilities of communication on Skype: the ability to see the interlocutor(-s) with the help of video channels; hear and speak via audio channel; the ability to share different applications and programs; receive and transmit files. In the e-learning environment, Skype is used as one of the tools for distant learning. Blog due to its characteristics has a personal character, and it is social as well. In other words, the author of the blog refers to his/her future readers right from his/her personal space. Every blogger is the only owner of the blog. It means that he/she can impose a ban on reading the blog by any user of the Internet, a ban on the publication of any comments, etc.

The use of these technologies creates the optimum conditions for increasing the motivation of students to oral, and, what is most important, writing activities. Many educators say that learners are not highly motivated to write in English when they are taught in a traditional (without computers) way. Today it is becoming obvious that digital devices are reviving the written way of communication. Professor Titova (2009) says that the integration of different kinds of electronic communications in the educational process develops all kinds of speech skills of students: the ability to hold a discussion in the form of a dialogue or polylogue, adduce arguments and object, to answer logically, to make clear conclusions, and to formulate their views.

Creative research method or it is often named as a project-based method includes a complex of search, research, and problem methods that allow considering the individual characteristics of each student and creating conditions for the development of his/her personality potential. The advent of information and communication technologies, and their integration into the educational paradigm in our society contributed to the formation of a new way of applying the project-based method, that is the web-project method. It is based on traditional principles; the difference is in the form of their organizations due to the specifics of their technological base. It is about using the Internet in their project work as: means of communication for the project partners; information resource to find the necessary information to complete the project; software for the project creation; space for publication of the results of the project activities. The teachers noted that the use of web-projects in EFL teaching is a huge advantage to communicate with native speakers, create a real language environment, which is a powerful motivation for working on the content of the project.

3. Research

The above-mentioned pedagogical principles and methods laid the basis for the methodical system of EFL teaching with the help of Web 2.0 tools. The aim of our study was to test the efficiency of the pedagogical integration of Internet technologies into the EFL teaching process in the e-learning environment. 78 2nd year students of Power Engineering Institute (National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University) took part in the experimental teaching process. They were divided into two groups: experimental and control. In the experimental group, the learning process was focused on the use of Web2.0 technologies for learning a foreign language; in the

control group a traditional training was supposed.

The research work was carried out during the academic year. At the beginning of the work we identified the students' proficiency in a foreign language (English). To determine the level of language skills, we used the Cambridge English Placement Test (www.cambridgeesol.org/placement) and obtained the following results:

Table 1. Students' proficiency in English. Stage 1 (% of total students).

	Beginners	Elementary	Pre-Intermediate	Intermediate	Upper-Intermediate
Experimental gr.	0	26	54	20	0
Control gr.	0	32	58	10	0

Based on the test results, we found out that the levels of the language proficiency of the students of both groups were about equal, and the level Pre-Intermediate prevailed.

At the end of the experiment we once again tested the students of both groups and got the following results:

Table 2. Students' proficiency in English. Final Stage (% of total students).

	Beginners	Elementary	Pre-Intermediate	Intermediate	Upper-Intermediate
Experimental gr.	0	2	38	56	4
Control gr.	0	28	61	11	0

Obviously, 4% of the students of the experimental group increased the level of the foreign language proficiency up to Upper-Intermediate in contrast to the results of the first testing. It has to be noted that no students of the control group had showed the Upper-Intermediate level by the end of the research work.

After studying the data of the research work, we concluded that the process of EFL teaching based on Web 2.0 tools in the e-learning environment runs effectively and efficiently, it shows high-quality results, significantly increases the level of the students' motivation to EFL learning, and increases the level of learners' foreign language proficiency as well.

4. Conclusion

Having analyzed the techniques under discussion, based on the introduction of new information and communication technologies, and having examined their peculiarities and benefits compared with the existing traditional methods in pedagogy, we came to the conclusion about the necessity of their integrated use in the process of EFL teaching. We have examined only some of the theoretical positions underlying the problem which requires further discussion and practical illustration, and have to add that the analysis of the implementation of these pedagogical principles and methods in the e-learning environment is not intended for the final comprehensive solution of the issues related to the organization of EFL training in modern higher educational institutions. However, we believe that the recognition of these principles and methods in their new interpretation will undoubtedly lead to an increase in the quality of EFL training of future specialists.

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