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STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS
IN ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

In attempt to move to leading positions in the word university ranking National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) implemented online courses as part of academic curriculum. Foreign language courses are accompanied now by the online component on Moodle, which has become an official Learning Management System (LMS) of TPU. This paper reports about the investigation of asynchronous online discussion efficacy in the learning process. Students' attitudes and expectations in such type of discussion were analyzed in order to present student's perception of learning in the discussion environment. The findings of this study indicate certain benefits and positive overall perception though some problems were identified and corresponding measures were suggested.

Keywords: *asynchronous online discussion, Moodle, online course.*

1. Introduction

Many Russian higher educational institutions focus today on the world recognition which can be achieved by acquiring top positions in the world university ranking. In order to integrate Russian universities in the world academic community Russian Ministry of Education and Science announced the «5–100» contest to provide state support to the leading Russian universities to improve their competitiveness among acknowledged scientific and academic centers in the world. The main goal of this project is entering of 5 Russian universities the top 100 world universities list by 2020.

Recognition by global academic society is quite a difficult objective and needs completely different content of educational system and its organization [1]. Russian universities recognize the necessity of examining critically the current practices and the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT). Only forming a new educational paradigm, universities can get a chance of entering the world university rankings and obtain leading positions.

Foreign language proficiency is highly demanded for fulfilling these challenging goals and is considered the priority in updating engineering education in Russia. The ability to communicate in other languages is becoming an integral part of professional competence of any specialist, no difference what field he or she works in. With changing requirements to specialist training there is a need to overhaul the content and approaches to teaching foreign languages to nonlinguistic students [2].

Due to limited number of contact hours for foreign language courses in engineering universities TPU intensifies the learning process by active integration of ICT. The university puts particular emphasis on e-learning technologies where blended learning method takes a special place as it combines face-to-face and online instruction. Therefore many language courses are accompanied by online components on Moodle platform, which is considered an official university LMS.

2. Asynchronous online discussion forum

One of the most effective Moodle tool for learning foreign languages is asynchronous online discussion forums. They facilitate students' communication beyond the classroom and allow participants to interact with each other without any time and place restrictions. One unique feature of asynchronous online discussion forum is that there is no loss of data as the discussion forum allows records of an individual's written messages to be kept in the virtual space [3]. Participants can respond the posted messages at any time they wish and to any student they choose.

Delayed answer is one more benefit of online discussions, students don't need to give immediate response as it is common during classroom discussions; they can view the post and respond in asynchronous manner. Students have time to think and reflect on their answers and other students' comments. In this case they construct their ideas more carefully and analyze the whole situation more thoroughly.

Students who do not usually contribute in traditional classroom discussions for certain reasons have an opportunity to express their ideas freely without being dominated by strong students.

There are usually three widespread problems of online discussions:
- limited student contribution;
- surface-level posts;
- low-level grammar constructions and improper vocabulary use.

Limited student contribution can be defined as absence or limited number of posts. Usually this problem is connected with procrastination and can't be easily solved but certain time limits for the task usually improve the situation. Another problem is surface-level posts containing useless information without expressing any opinion on the discussion problem. Some students write messages just for the sake of participation, they repeat or paraphrase other students' ideas and don't contribute anything new or valuable to the discussion. The moderator of the discussion or teacher should stop these practices and encourage such students to a more productive mode. Low-level grammar constructions and improper vocabulary use can disturb other participants' understanding. These students can be advised to use reference materials, dictionaries, in addition the participants may ask additional questions in order to understand what they mean.

3. Online Discussions in «General English Blended Course»

On the basis of «General English Blended Course» for first year students of TPU, which provides online materials as supplementary resources to the main course, we will try to explore such element as asynchronous online

discussion forum. The semester course consists of 6 modules, each of which has a section called «Team work» with online discussions and wikis. Discussion forums are set for small group of students (8-10 participants), who should give their opinions on the issue given by the teacher. Then they should read the opinions of other participants and comment on at least 2 of them. If there are no posts to comment, they should return later. Forums have peer assessment instrument, students can assess the posts of their group-mates from 0 to 5 according to the rubric given in the Forum Instruction. The discussion issue is usually based on course-related topics. Example issues for Module 3 «Healthy Lifestyle» were the following:

- GM food: helpful or harmful?
- Diets are the key to weight loss. Do you agree?
- Fast food restaurants should be blamed for obesity. Do you agree?
- Employees should always be fired for failing the drugs test. Do you agree?
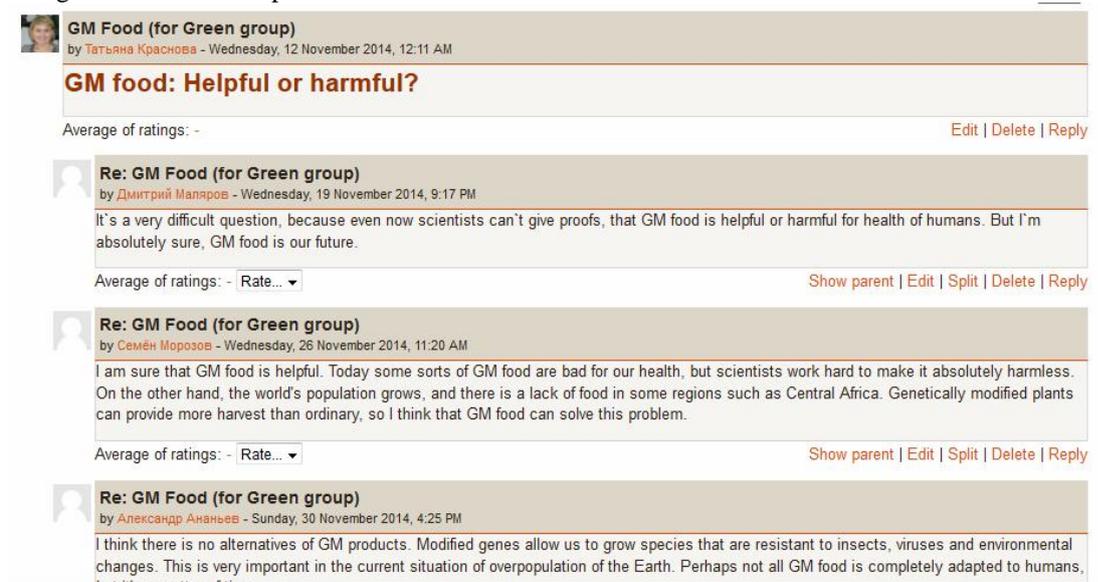
In Fig.1 there is an example of online discussion:

Fig. 1. Online Discussion in General English Blended Course

The criteria for discussion assessment are presented to students in advance and include the following:

- the content should be complete and accurate, offer new ideas;
- the ideas should be supported with details that explain student's opinion;
- the content of the message should encourage further discussion on the issue;
- the message is characterized by relevance and originality;
- the participant completed the task within the required timeframe;
- the participants comments on at least 2 other students;
- raises other relevant questions.

4. Methods and data analysis

Quantitative methods were employed to collect the data that contribute to the understanding of the phenomena studied. To establish the framework of the study a survey research was conducted.

The main questions underlying the study were:

1. What is the overall perception of asynchronous online discussions by students?
2. What are students' expectations from asynchronous online discussions?

The study was carried out among 46 enrolled students (11 female and 35 male) getting a Bachelor degree at TPU in the spring term of 2014-2015 academic year.All of them participated regularly in asynchronous online discussions during the academic year.

Table 1 shows online discussion participation details.

Table 1. Asynchronous online discussion details

Number of participants	46
Number of online discussions	5
Number of threads	10
Number of postings	326

The survey contained 9 questions with empty boxes for writing the answers and 1 question with checkbox items, where participants could select one or more items from a set of options.

5. Results

Most students (89 %) found asynchronous online discussions beneficial to their language learning and called them the key component of the online course. They encourage students to express ideas, share experiences, improve writing skills, and practice grammar and vocabulary. While some students (21 %) think that traditional discussions are better, and online discussions are completely useless and just a waste of time.

On average students contribute 2 messages: one of which is their opinion and the other is a comment of somebody's post. Therefore a discussion thread of a typical language group of 10 students contains not more than 20 postings, sometimes even less, because some students didn't contribute at all.

In comparison with traditional classroom discussions students pointed out the following advantages of online discussions:

- opportunity to choose convenient time for a discussion;
- enough time to think over the topic;
- development of writing skills;
- lack of interruptions and ability to express full thoughts;
- non-linear format of discussion which allows to respond to any participant;
- opportunity to consult a dictionary.

The majority of students (97 %) believe that online discussions promote thoughtful, in-depth reflection on discussion issues but the other group of students (3 %) thinks that they act the same as in traditional discussion in the classroom.

90 % of students confessed that they experience procrastination problem while participating in online discussions. Students put off this task up to the deadline that is why the discussion can move forward very slowly at the beginning and become very active at the end. The main reasons were called; these were laziness and lack of self-discipline.

Students usually have 1 week for a discussion and 95 % believe that allocated time is enough to participate in it and only 5 % want it to be longer.

Some students prefer to be lurkers through their interaction and experiences with the community; they rarely participate in discussions [4]. Table 2 shows the reasons why students don't post messages in online discussions.

Table 2. Reasons for non-posting

Reasons	Number of participants	Percentage
Nothing to offer	23	50 %
Others responded the way I would	33	71,7 %
There are too many posts already	0	0 %
Not enough time to read and post	17	36,9 %
Long delay in response to posting	16	34,7 %
Shy about posting	3	6,5 %
Poor quality of previous messages	6	12,8 %
Just reading is enough	0	0 %

As we see from Table 2 the most common reasons for non-posting in online discussions are that others have already responded the way the student wanted and lack of ideas. Long delays and strict time limit can also cause problems and prevent them from participating. Some students consider the posts of their group-mates of low quality and therefore lose motivation to continue the discussion. There are 3 shy students who are still afraid of posting their ideas and no one thinks that 'just reading' is enough for participation in online discussions. 'Too many posts' wasn't chosen as a reason for not participating probably because they understand that individual performance is assessed.

As for overall attitude to online discussions we can figure out that it positive. They admit that it is a way of communication and good for practicing English. Some students mentioned that they don't like discussions at all and it doesn't matter if they are online or traditional ones. They don't expect anything special from this type of activity as it is quite common but want to have more interesting and relevant issues for discussion. Some students told that other groups' topics were more fascinating and challenging than theirs.

6. Conclusion

Transition to a new educational paradigm with integration of e-learning in the process of learning foreign languages enables new unique opportunities for students. Online courses on Moodle platform offer engaging and highly motivating activities that positively affect students' performance and promote their progress. Asynchronous online discussions are primary component of online language courses, they give the opportunity to interact, reflect and collaborate. The study proves that online discussion is students' favourite activity; they feel comfortable in online environment and express their ideas more freely and in a more descriptive way.

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ОТНОШЕНИЯ И ОЖИДАНИЯ СТУДЕНТОВ В АСИНХРОННОЙ ОНЛАЙН ДИСКУССИИ

Национальный исследовательский Томский политехнический университет (ТПУ) пытается занять лидирующую позицию в мировом рейтинге лучших университетов, в связи с чем было инициировано введение онлайн курсов в программу университета. Языковые курсы теперь имеют онлайн компонент, размещенный на платформе Moodle, которая является официальной системой управления обучением в ТПУ. Данная работа рассматривает эффективность асинхронной онлайн дискуссии в образовательном процессе. Были проанализированы ожидания студентов от онлайн дискуссии и их отношение к данному виду работы. Результаты исследования указывают, что существуют определенные преимущества, и говорят об общем позитивном восприятии онлайн дискуссий студентами. Но в то же время были обнаружены определенные проблемы и предложены способы их решения.

Ключевые слова: асинхронная онлайн дискуссия, Moodle, онлайн курс.

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TUTOR'S ROLE IN ONLINE COURSES

The increased use of information and communication technologies in education demands a critical review of the approaches used for supporting teaching and learning activities in online environment. The paper discusses the special role of the tutor who guides and supports the learning process in the online course supplementing traditional face-to-face activities in the blended learning model. Students' evaluations of tutor's role were analyzed and underlay this study. The findings show that professional and successful tutoring helps students in improving their learning efficacy and having greater personal responsibility for their outcomes.

Keywords: blended learning, e-learning, online course, tutor.

1. Introduction

Integration of information and communication technologies in the educational process of Russian universities has become a modern trend. Continuous growth of e-learning technologies leads to a real revolution in the learning process in higher educational institutions. At present e-learning technologies are widely used in most Russian universities, they are thought to be a powerful tool for intensification and individualization of learning. When Individual peculiarities of students are taken into consideration, they allow creating optimal conditions for potential capabilities implementation of each student [1].

National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) makes a particular emphasis on e-learning, aiming to increase university competitiveness on educational market and move up the world university ranking. At present active work on building single e-learning environment based on smart education principles such as the system of competence formation, individual learning trajectories development and personal educational environment creation is being conducted [2]. TPU implements three e-learning models with different correlation of time allocation and workload, organizational principlesof face-to-face and online learning. They are:
*   learning with web-support;