

Investigating effective foreign language learning design and the implications for distance learning tools

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Abstract

The relevance of the present study is due to the importance of the foreign language learning experiences designed by university educators for their MSc students and implemented using distance learning tools. The main objective of this paper is to examine and evaluate the content design of a foreign language course taught in non-linguistic universities as exemplified by the "Business Foreign Language" course for MSc students. On the basis of the proposed priority learning activities, as well as the specific features of distance learning tools, the authors offer a Learning design (Conceptual map) of a 'Business Foreign Language' course for MSc students. The training course content is presented as a set of foreign language learning experiences and activities. The findings of this research advance educators' thinking about the need for the design content to include flexibility that enables a teacher to adapt, revise, refine and reflect on the design while implementing distance learning tools.

Key words: foreign language training course, distance learning tools, distance learning, learning design, design-based research

1. Introduction

1.1 Urgency of the problem

In recent years the advent of the internet and widespread use of computers and i-things such as iPads, iPhones have led to a huge growth in distantly delivered learning and study.

Among all the objectives determined by the Act of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation No 137 of May 6, 2005 "On using distance educational technologies" (http://www.edu.ru/db-minobr/mo/Data/d_05/m137.html) and the Federal Law dated February 28, 2012 "On inclusion of changes to Federal Law "On education" in the part of electronic education, distance educational technologies" (<http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=LAW;n=126574>) the modernization of educational programs and their contents is seen as a priority along with enabling teachers to design and implement their own modules, courses and programs aimed at promoting efficient foreign language learning experiences implemented using distance learning tools.

The launch of new foreign language teaching standards, development of appropriate curricula and effective foreign language learning design including both national and foreign experience in this field are required by the processes of education internationalization (Grigoryeva et al., 2015: 123). From this perspective, the problem of designing effective foreign language learning experiences and its implementation at higher education institution in the context of education internationalization is one of the most important issues of the modern national pedagogy.

For university educators, designing effective learning experiences requires them to draw together their specialist domain expertise with appropriate teaching strategies, while integrating the range of digital technologies that are now commonplace in higher education. This represents a significant challenge for even the most experienced university educators (Bennett et al., 2016: 1).

Today, a considerable number of universities in Russia are investing in the development of various distance learning programs, and foreign language courses are no exception. Therefore, in a number of high institutions the tendency of decrease in lecture hours is observed, up to full reduction of some disciplines or their replacement with video courses (Frolova et al., 2016). Blended learning technology in teaching foreign language presents much interest to language teachers throughout the world. Unlike pure e-learning which refers to instruction delivered via electronic media, blended learning creates a personalized mix of face-to-face and digital learning experiences for each student (Vasbieva et al., 2016b). Most higher education institutions offer distance learning format in addition to traditional on-campus programs, particularly, for MSc students, implemented using distance learning tools. It should be noted that distance learning will not work if the university does not have a well-constructed electronic learning environment including computer-supported collaborative learning, electronic learning resources and learning administration system (Borisova et al., 2016b). However, the algorithm of language teaching content and methodological support implementing in the language training have not been worked out completely yet. In practice, most e-learning platforms often only contain control tasks (texts, tests, exercises) that students may download, perform, and then send to tutors for checking, at best, via e-mail. Besides, they are often limited to a specific course and cannot be considered efficient in view of enhancing ESP classes with web-based e-learning. Rather than acting as supervisors of learning, universities may increasingly become providers of services, offering the infrastructure and opportunities for skills development to support appropriate and effective e-learning based on a wider range of options (Vasbieva, Klimova, 2015: 8). So, university educators struggle with designing of training courses implemented using distance learning tools that can effectively engage MSc students in developing their knowledge and skills and prepare them to learn online to increase their professional competence. The use of such technologies prepares the learner for an adequate perception of reality, helps to avoid the state of uncertainty, stiffness, which is experienced by a person who first appeared in a real foreign environment. With their help, students prepare themselves for real contacts with representatives of other cultures, learn to understand their business partners and learn how to effectively communicate to achieve their goals (Vasbieva, Kalugina, 2016: 59).

Therefore, to ensure an effective foreign language design for future MSc students in Finance and Economics implemented using distance learning tools, it is essential to examine two intertwined factors:

1) competence-based curriculum requirements and expected learning outcomes

2) specific services and applications of distance learning tools contributing to the development of these competences

Within this framework, we can design a structure of a foreign language course, providing for the development of all kinds of speech activity, as well as academic skills in the field of information search, analysis and processing, as well as strategic skills in the field of independent research and professional activities.

Any process of result achievement involves passing a number of successive stages and phases of activity. In our study instructional designing is aimed at achieving a specific result, i.e. the design of foreign language teaching content for future MSc students in Finance and Economics in the context of education internationalization and new requirements of labour market in era of globalisation.

2. Review of Literature

In recent years, research into learning design has become very popular. S. Barab & K. Squire (2004), P. Cobb, J. Confrey, A. diSessa, R. Lehrer & L. Schauble

(2004) advocated the methodology of design-based research to address the complicated and integral nature of existing learning design problems. M. Bower (2016) claims that “while design-based research is not strictly considered to be a learning design concept or practice, its typical focus on improving learning and teaching in technology enabled environments means that it is often used in learning design contexts”.

A learning design is defined in methodological literature as “a sequence of teaching and learning activities, a plan for potential activities with learners, which is to be distinguished from a particular implementation of this plan with a particular group of learners” (Bower, 2016).

The vast majority of research on design support has generated a multitude of different approaches, contributing to different aspects of Learning Design (see the Learning Design Conceptual Map, Figure 4 in Dalziel et al. 2013). Some have emphasized the development of tools to support design so that educators generate their design ideas (e.g., The Learning Design Support Environment (LDSE) project explained in Laurillard et al. (2013); and see Conole (2013) for a review of Learning Design tools). Others have focused on backing up the sharing of ‘good’ design ideas through repositories or online networking tools (e.g., online community sharing (<http://cloudworks.open.ac.uk/>), and collections of examples or cases (e.g., <http://www.pedagogicalpatterns.org/>, <http://www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/>). These efforts have been backed up by research into different ways in which designs have been effectively brought forward, e.g. see Agostinho, Harper, Oliver, Wills, and Hedberg (2008), Agostinho (2009), Agostinho (2011), Agostinho, Bennett, Lockyer, Jones & Harper (2013); Conole (2013); McAndrew and Goodyear (2013) and Borisova et al., (2016a). Bennett et al., (2011; 2015) has sought to understand more about the fundamental design processes educators adopt in an effort to identify the context in which design occurs, the types of decisions that are part of the design process, and where support might be best located (Bennett et al., 2016: 1).

The literature on learning design poorly investigated the issues of the content design of a foreign language course implemented using distance learning tools and taught in non-linguistic universities as exemplified by the "Business Foreign Language" course for MSc students developing professional competence.

3. Methodology

The study has been undertaken as part of the methodology of pedagogy, methodology and fundamental pedagogical works considering information and communication technologies, ESP e-learning and teachers’ contribution to educational process.

The following methods have been used in our research: the key pedagogical and methodological principles of designing modern study programs, the analysis of learning design literature, analysis of information-and-analytical skills required for the implementation of project tasks, evaluation of educational outcomes, systematization and generalization of facts and concepts, modeling, method of expert evaluation, design of foreign language learning experiences for foreign language distance course taught in non-linguistic universities as exemplified by the "Business Foreign Language" course for MSc students.

4. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this research paper was to implement an analysis of Educational Standard of Higher Education for MSc training in "Finance and Economics" that would show the next set of skills to be formed and developed in the framework of the "Business Foreign Language" course.

Table 1: Learning outcomes developed by means of the "Business Foreign language" course (MSc in Finance and Economics)

Competence	Developed skills
ability for abstract reasoning, analysis, synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • formulate theories about the nature of objects and ideas in a foreign language; • detect underlying patterns and relationships between events, ideas, and objects in the process of communication, while studying information in the foreign language; • describe, define, understand relevant components of the problem; • synthesize information in tackling professional problems, by using a foreign language.
ability to conduct research on scientific issues in field of economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • data handling (acquisition, management, and storage); • communication, delivering.
ability to use Russian and a foreign language as a means of professional communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tackle various professional problems by means of Russian and a foreign language; • implement the functions: communication, decision making, organization, motivation, control, planning; • perform written tasks, following the formal requirements to their content and structure; • present the results of work orally in different forms (presentations, reports, discussion).
ability and readiness to lead the team in the sphere of the professional activity, tolerantly accepting social, ethnic, confessional and cultural differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop awareness of the values of national and world culture in terms of understanding the relationship of cooperation between cultures; • evolve positive interaction with other cultures, particularly in relation to conflicts in intercultural interaction; • develop new mental and emotional consciousness, including the presence of positive attitudes on interpersonal communication and teamwork, self-confidence on the basis of the dialogue of cultures.
ability to use information technology to solve various research and administrative tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluate sources for reliability, credibility, and worth; • use basic methods of translation and information transfer from one language into another; • develop solid logical and critical-thinking skills.
readiness to act in non-standard situations, to bear social and ethical responsibility for decisions made	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze the situational context of business communication caused by cultural diversity; • overcome the typical translation difficulties, solve diverse translation problems.

To plan the syllabus, we made four decisions:

- focus on English for specific purposes as more than 50% of MSc students are employed in different financial fields;

- introduce topic-based syllabus which will allow to create different tasks targeted at development of professional competencies;
- plan communicative and interactive course to make classes more learner-centred;
- select foreign language learning experiences and distance learning tools which will allow students to feel that they are progressing.

The first day of class we administered a simple proficiency test, developed by the teachers of the Department of the Foreign Languages at the university. We asked 40 MSc students to complete a needs analysis questionnaire (see Fig. 1) to determine whether their perceived needs were the same as the ones that had been predicted.

We had expected students to select reading and listening as their priorities, and business and specific topics they would like to study within the course.

Figure 1: Needs Analysis Questionnaire and Results

1. What skill should be given a priority within the course?
a) Reading (12%)
▪ General (25%)
▪ Specific (30%)
▪ Scientific (45%)
b) Writing (40%)
▪ Letters (8%)
▪ E-mails (26%)
▪ Reports (specific) (31%)
▪ Research papers (35%)
c) Speaking (33%)
▪ Small talk (12%)
▪ General conversation (13%)
▪ Discussions (31%)
▪ Negotiations (26%)
▪ Presentations (18%)
d) Listening (15%)
▪ General (25%)
▪ Specific (45%)
▪ Scientific (30%)
2. What topic is considered to be the most appropriate one within the course?
▪ General (14%)
▪ Business (28%)
▪ Scientific (58%)
3. What e-learning activity do you prefer?
a) Synchronous (38%)
▪ Chat and IM (37%)
▪ Video and audio conference (15%)
▪ Live webcasting (15%)
▪ Application sharing (14%)
▪ Whiteboard (8%)
▪ Polling (11%)
b) Asynchronous (62%)
▪ E-mail (57%)
▪ Discussion forum (20%)
▪ Wiki (6%)

- Blog (8%)
 - Webcasting (9%)
4. Which method of learning do you find the most efficient one?
- a) Expositive methods (15%)
 - Presentations (30%)
 - Case studies (37%)
 - Worked examples (13%)
 - Demonstrations (20%)
 - b) Application methods (63%)
 - Demonstrations-practise methods (8%)
 - Jobs aids (11%)
 - Case-based exercises (24%)
 - Role plays (19%)
 - Simulations and serious games (10%)
 - Guided research (13%)
 - Project work (15%)
 - c) Collaborative methods (22 %)
 - Online guided discussion (25%)
 - Colaborative work (35%)
 - Peer tutoring (40%)
5. Write a short summary of your experience and your expectations from this subject.

However, the students have selected writing and speaking as the skills to be required. It can be explained by the fact that they are the skills less developed in bachelor’s degree programs and the most necessary in international professional contacts.

The fact that students selected «scientific topics» came as a surprise. We expect that this result is due to two factors that we had not foreseen:

- 1) MSc students need to complete a thesis based on laboratory or library research by the end of their studying;
- 2) More than 20 percent of MSc students are planning to take postgraduate qualification which requires solid logical and critical-thinking skills developed by means of «scientific topics».

As figure 1 shows, the students chose asynchronous e-learning activities as the most preferable ones as asynchronous events are time-independent.

The students considered expositive methods which require learners to listen and read or observe to be less efficient in comparison to collaborative and application methods. However it can be combined with other methods and can be used for acquiring information which is a crucial thing for learning process.

Application methods were of great value according to the summaries of students’ expectations because they could give an opportunity to apply knowledge and principles to a concrete situation, involve them in practical activities including simulations or research activities.

From a level test we found out that the students ranged from intermediate to upper intermediate level in English proficiency: 37 percent were intermediate level, 63 percent were upper intermediate. This result meant that new innovative foreign

language learning experiences are required to motivate upper level students, to make them progress.

We decided that the course would devote 20 minutes weekly to each of the four skills, including 10 minutes for revision. Managing a classroom of students at the different learning levels was a challenge for the teacher that is why students were paired and grouped as either “like-ability” or “cross-ability.” “Like-ability is where students of the same proficiency level work together. The benefit of like-ability matching is that similar needs of the students can be addressed. Cross-ability is where students of different proficiency levels work together. The benefit of cross-ability matching is that the higher-level students can help the lower-level students” (Roberts, 2007).

Considering the available time (only thirty six hours) and the results of the questionnaire we had to make conceptual map (thematic plan) and identify ways of working with the material. Table 2 shows the content that we decided to focus on in the course.

Table 2: Learning design (Conceptual map) of a ‘Business Foreign Language’ course

Conceptual map	
Topics	E-learning activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business ethics and etiquette. Ethical problems of business relations. Ethical principles. • Types of companies. Business processes of the company: modelling, analysis, recommendations. Company key performance indicators. Organisation structure and process optimisation. • Modern methods of personnel management. Motivation of labor activity. Corporate culture. • Principles of organizing and conducting business meetings. Analysis of non-standard situations. Conflict management. • Basic rules and principles of project management. Project organizational structure. Risk assessment. • Quality control. Advertising activity. Strategic marketing. Marketing research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chat and IM • Video and audio conference • Live webcasting • Application sharing • Whiteboard • Polling • E-mail • Discussion forum • Blog • Webcasting <p style="text-align: center;">Methods of learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations • Case studies • Guided research • Project work • Colaborative work

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiations. Negotiation rules and tactics. Business meetings planning and organization guidelines. • National business communication etiquette. Reception of foreign delegations. Organization of presentations and receptions. Professional communication etiquette rules. 	
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To assess students’ performance in the course we created tasks that accounted for 60 percent of the final grade. The assessment covered the skills and aspects we had worked on during the course: reading, listening, speaking, writing:

1. Glossary creation - 300 terminological units (20 percent);
2. Literature review (reading 250 pages) on the subject of the course (20 percent);
3. Presentation of research results on the topic and its discussion (20 percent).

Before the exam, the students took a practice test on the web-page so they could assess themselves. The final grade was made up of the grade for the final test, attendance and work in class (10 percent), homework (10 percent), the written assignment (10 percent) and speaking activities such as case-study, role plays, project work (10 percent). This distribution was beneficial for Msc students with a low level of English proficiency who had made a great effort during the course. The following table summarizes the main characteristics of each type of question presented in the final test:

Table 3. Types of questions

	Positive sides	Negative sides
True or False	Easy to create. Can differentiate feedback for each option.	Learners have a 50 percent chance of selecting the right option. The answer is not created by the learner.
Multiple choice	Very flexible (can be used for several purposes). Can differentiate feedback for each option.	Difficult to create (you have to develop credible wrong options and write different feedback for each of them). The answer is not created by the learner
Multiple responses	Very flexible (can be used for several purposes).	Quite difficult to create (you have to develop credible wrong options). The answer is not created by the learner.
Matching	Quite easy to create	Risk of being too easy for learners. The answer is not created by the learner.

Ordering	Quite easy to create.	The answer is not created by the learner
Fill-in the blanks	Easy to create.	Rarely appropriate. Difficult to measure.
Short answer/short essay	The answer is created by the learner.	Very difficult to measure.

Source: E-learning methodologies: A guide for designing and developing e-learning courses. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Rome, 2011. (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/015/i2516e/i2516e.pdf>)

Table 4 contains the students' ranking the efficiency of distance learning tools implemented in the course. The results show the order in which the students ranked the distance learning tools and the percentage of students that ranked each tool in first, second, or third place. «Chat and IM» gained great popularity among the students as we used these tools mostly for competitive problem solving, brainstorming, preparing debates.

E-mail based tools took the second place as it is the simplest mechanism for direct, one-to-one communication between the teacher and learner. Moreover the e-mails were used for responses which might embarrass the recipient in case it is posted in a public space. Such distance learning tool as Whiteboard was ranked as the third most efficient distance learning tool. It turned out to be surprising because Needs Analysis Questionnaire ranked it as the least preferable one. It can be explained by the fact that the students hadn't used the tool in bachelor's degree programs and were not aware of the main function of it: interaction with the content displayed by the instructors.

Table 4: Ranking the efficiency of distance learning tools

Most efficient distance learning tools	Percentage of students
Chat and IM	74
E-mail	68
Whiteboard	58
Video and audio conference	50
Live webcasting	46
Discussion forum	36
Wiki	30
Blog	20
Application sharing	12
Webcasting	8
Polling	5
Everything	3

5. Conclusion

Thus quality design is crucial to effective learning experiences and outcomes. Integrating the range of digital technologies is needed and this is the challenge the field of Business Foreign Language Learning Design engages with. The findings of this project advance our thinking about the need for the design content to include flexibility that enables a teacher to adapt, revise, refine and reflect on the design while implementing distance learning tools. Efficiency of modern technologies and methods of training will depend in many respects on the teacher's ability to solve the problem not only of creating the comfortable psychological and emotional environment for training, but also of finding optimal balance between

selecting relevant professional activity of the contents and distance learning tools enabling to form competencies required for students to be competitive in the global labor market.

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