INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL: FLIPPING THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) has always been the subject to innovations, particularly alongside the advances in technology. In the digital era, the range of technologies available for use in language learning and teaching has become very diverse and the task of a teacher is to choose and adapt the ones that might cause positive effect on the learning/teaching outcomes.

There have been large increases in innovative pedagogic practices in areas such as personalization of teaching, developing self-study skills and learner autonomy. The flipped learning model (FLM) of instruction has become normative practice among many university language instructors. This innovative teaching approach does not have a universal definition but generally refers to using digital technologies, especially videos in order to shift direct learning out of the large group learning space and move it into the individual learning space (N. Hamdan and P. McKnight et al.). Although Flipped Learning is often compared to online, blended, and distance learning, there are clear differences due to the emphasis on students becoming the agents of their own learning rather than the object of instruction. Thus, the FLM can enable educators to make the shift from teacher-driven instruction to student-centered learning. The article describes the experience of using free digital platform Edmodo in flipping the English as a second language (ESL) classroom for learner autonomy.

Keywords: innovations, flipped learning, learner autonomy.

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of foreign language (FL) education, which is a significant component in the higher education system, is under the impact of innovative trends characteristic of modern society. The focus on the formation and development of a new type of personality with inherent innovative thinking and willingness for innovative creation is to be made mainly via ideology of innovative education, since professional scientific knowledge, supplemented with specialized unique competences and skills related to professional foreign-language communication, tend to become a pivotal factor in the further development of the entire system of language training in general, and the personality of the future professional, in particular.

The Russian project 5-100, where South Ural State University is a full participant, initiated the introduction of radical changes into the system of foreign-language training in universities, aimed at evaluating activities of both the teacher and student, which comply with international standards of assessment. In particular, the SUSU road map [1] within the framework of Strategic Initiative 8 (SI8) "Implementation of new models and technologies of education" sets the priority for the Task 8.1.3 (T 8.1.3) "To implement the system of in-depth language training in the bachelor's degree program", which predetermines development of the foreign language training system in SUSU for the next 4 years and fuels further innovations.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Defining Innovations

According to D. Carless [2], the study of innovation in language education began to generate particular interest only from the 1980s onwards, with important early contributions including Kennedy (1988) from a UK perspective and Henrichsen (1989) from a US one. In recent decades, interest for innovation has grown substantially, particularly in general education in the work of scholars such as Michael Fullan (e.g., Fullan, 2001) and Andy Hargreaves (e.g., Hargreaves, 2003), and also in language education, as evidenced by recent books: Murray (2008), Alderson (2009), and Wedell (2009). Innovation is defined as an attempt to bring about educational improvement by doing something, which is perceived by implementers as new, or different. Examples of innovation in
language education over the past few decades include new pedagogic approaches, such as task-based language teaching; changes to teaching materials; technological developments, such as computer-assisted language learning; and alternative assessment methods, such as the use of portfolios [2].

In Russian language education, the problem of creating and implementing innovations into the process of foreign languages teaching (FLT) is primarily linked to the rationale behind application of new tools and resources, methods, and techniques (N.D. Gal'skova, A.N. Shchukin, N.F. Koryakovtseva, R.P. Millrud, E. S. Polat). Since pedagogical innovation and language education are currently on the verge of integration, the leading domestic scholars as N.D. Gal'skova, E.G. Tareva believe that the new branch of the science of FLT has emerged, namely language education innovation, which is associated with the following issues:

- identifying the notion of innovation in FL teaching (criteria and verification indicators for innovations);
- designing language education innovations at different levels of FL teaching;
- developing a technology for creating, implementing, promoting, and commercializing innovation [3].

Besides, recognizing the components of FL teacher innovative competence and the ways of its development will be of great importance as well.

N.I. Almazova, A.V. Rubtsova use the term "language education pedagogical innovation" to identify a new direction in language education. According to their methodological approach, the concept of innovativeness in language education is directly related to the idea of efficiency as a meaningful concept of the productive approach, promoted by representatives of this school in professionally oriented FL education. They singled out a number of characteristic features of language education pedagogical innovation, such as:

- adaptability of educational process (concern for individuality of every student);
- ability to actualize the personality characteristics of the student (appeal to the processes of self-actualization of the individual);
- equal partnership of the educational process participants (observance of the principle of "dialogue equality");
- methodological relevance (balance of the teacher’s efforts and the ultimate result of education);
- diversity of forms and types of educational activity, determined by the poly-code nature of modern communication [4].

The authors believe that these particular features determine a high degree of efficiency of professionally oriented FL education. Despite some differences in the interpretation of innovative trends in language education by domestic researchers, it can be summarized that the problem of innovation in language education requires special consideration. There arises a need to regulate terminology related to this phenomenon, specify the author’s research position and consider the prospects for using an innovative approach while organizing specific educational practices.

It is widely acknowledged that novation is regarded as something new, while novelty is a product of mastering and introducing innovations. Unlike novation and novelty, innovation in the pedagogical context is seen as a deliberate, specially designed modification that, when implemented in the educational system, results in its sustainable progressive development, causing the transition of the system to a qualitatively new state. In terms of systemic-synergetic approach, innovations are represented by relevantly meaningful and systemically self-organizing new formations.

Their emergence is based on the contradictions in the activity of the subject of education; consequently, these new formations are becoming increasingly relevant for the evolution of education and have a positive impact on the expansion of the educational space. Thus, on the one hand, innovation can be viewed as a process of the educational system renewal, on the other hand, as an activity to manage the implementation of innovations in educational practice.

Under the conditions of dynamic development of education, the increase of its research intensity and efficiency, pedagogical innovations are characterized by the fact that they:
• represent a specific type of activity that is linked to the creation, dissemination and application of a new educational tool;
• reflect the contradictions arisen in the sphere of education and are aimed at their solution;
• facilitate satisfaction of needs of the educational process participants;
• influence the change of the target component of the entire educational system, which leads to its modernization and emergence of new approaches to the management process;
• are systemic in nature and go beyond existing theories;
• aim at designing a new educational system, cultivating the conditions for the formation of appropriate competencies;
• focus on transforming the positions of the educational process subjects and improving the quality of the results of their activities based on the creation of new activities and new educational technologies [5].

From a procedural point of view, we consider pedagogical innovation as a process of managing the creation, implementation and dissemination of innovations in the educational process. In our opinion, primarily, management activity focused on solving specific problems and developed in accordance with pedagogical principles provides the necessary result of FL training in a non-linguistic institution.

According to Carless [2], innovations are extremely difficult to engineer successfully, and the work by Rogers (2003) outlines five often-cited factors, which influence end users’ responses: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability.

2.2 Innovative Tools and Technologies

No doubt that the advances in technology brought about drastic changes in FLT. Having analyzed the latest publications related to the impact of technology on FLT we pointed out the most widely noted and cited ones [6].

2.2.1 Digital and Online Learning Platforms

Digital educational platforms are widely used in managing self-directed learning, blended learning and distance foreign language teaching. They provide educational support and serve as a tool for improving the quality of language learning. Nowadays world’s leading educational companies (CUP, Pearson, OUP) offer course books with an access to online learning platforms that are full of components to help teachers and learners make the process of foreign language acquisition productive and efficient. Interactive online course books and workbooks give students sufficient amount of controlled practice that can be done regardless of the time and place of the study. Online access means instant access anytime, anywhere. They contain a lot motivating tools (animation, video, games, blogs) that provide exciting opportunities for students’ self-study whereas class time can be better used by focusing on specific areas where students need additional work, and by creating opportunities for greater interaction.

For teachers, it is a new way to organize educational environment: they are convenient, flexible, time saving tools that can help monitor students’ learning.

Besides, social media offers diverse free platforms such as blogs and wikis for teachers to use in FLT. For example, Edmodo helps create a safe learning environment with a variety of digital tools for students and teachers’ interaction, providing content in different formats, managing students’ progress. There are some other platforms that allow learning languages free: Duolingo, Busuu, Live Mocha, LingQ.com, Byki, Lang 8, Lingualia, Digital Dialects, Memrise.

2.2.2 Online corpora, online dictionaries, thesauri, and definition aggregators

With most corpora now available online (http://www.ruscorpora.ru/, http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk, http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/, http://www.cambridge.org/us/cambridgeenglish/about-cambridge-english/cambridge-english-corpora etc.), teachers have access to information about the way language is used in authentic texts and speeches. Students can simply search the words on Google, which uses the internet as its corpus. Moreover, there is a variety of on-line dictionaries based on corpora that provide teachers and learners with the digital program which lets people hear the correct pronunciation of words spoken in British and American, find definitions of words, guides to take the appropriate meaning, contains relevant examples of words in context. Some of them are
comprehensive reference sites with synonyms, sentence examples, quotes, biographies, and collection of grammar-related articles and education resources for students, teachers, parents and homeschoolers.

2.2.3 Mobile learning and BYOD (bring your own device).

The rapid development of mobile technology and the proliferation of smart phones enabled both teachers and learners with the internet access and a huge variety of apps on the go. The use of mobile devices is often accompanied by learner mobility across diverse contexts and settings.

Mobile pedagogy for English language teaching is based on the belief that teachers and learners are active participants in making and shaping language learning. Active participation in language teaching and learning implies that learners take responsibility for their own learning and that teachers play their part in enabling this. Mobile technologies enable the implementation of this philosophy in ways that were previously impossible. Students now carry with them powerful devices with which they can create and share multimodal texts, communicate spontaneously with people anywhere in the world, capture language use outside the classroom, analyse their own language production and learning needs, construct artefacts and share them with others, provide evidence of progress gathered across a range of settings, in a variety of media [7].

All these bring us to the idea that with the development of technology learning can become more autonomous when some of the class activities can be flipped. In many respects, this has changed the teacher's role from that of knowledge-transmitter to consultant, guide, coach, and/or facilitator.

2.3 Flipped Learning

Having emerged as an alternative model of instruction Flipped Learning in which digital technologies are used to shift direct instruction outside of the group learning space to the individual learning space has become a global initiative that connects practitioners all over the world.

As stated in NMC Horizon Report the flipped classroom model is part of a larger pedagogical movement that overlaps with blended learning, inquiry-based learning, and other instructional approaches and tools that are meant to be flexible, active, and more engaging for students [8].

In White Paper [10] Flipped Learning is defined as a “pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter.” By moving from a flipped class to actively engaging in Flipped Learning, teachers are able to implement new or various methodologies into their classrooms. It frees up class time, allowing for more individual and small group instruction.

The authors distinguish four basic elements of F-L-I-P: Flexible Environment (F), Learning Culture (L), Intentional Content (I), and Professional Educator (P) [10] .

3 RESULTS

Modern students belong to Generation Z, who are digital integrators. They write and communicate in new ways with new syntax using multi-modal approaches. For them simplicity and flexibility are vital, they are connected to a borderless world, visuals and videos are most often the norm. Due to the fact, that traditional methods of language instruction are not always successful, the popularity of the flipped, blended, or hybrid classroom has grown rapidly in recent years because students prefer more technology-enhanced learning experiences.

As the developers of Flipped learning state flipped classrooms allow for a variety of learning modes: group work, independent study, research, performance, and evaluation. Moreover, educators should build appropriate assessments systems that objectively measure understanding in a way that is meaningful for students and the teacher [10].

For realizing the idea of flipped classroom, the choice of technology and its integration is of great importance. The flipped classroom uses technology to allow students more time to apply knowledge and more time for teachers for hands-on education. It is a continually changing strategy, which evolves with technology [11].
Although Moodle and Blackboard are widely used to support and manage blended and distant courses at South Ural State university we decided to use Edmodo [12] to flip our English class because it is free and doesn’t require any special training as Edmodo does.

Edmodo is a comprehensive web-based learning management system that supports learning and networking between learners and teachers, offers educator networks and resources, discussion and collaboration features, grading and assessment options. It is student-friendly because its interface resembles social networks with added features like posts, assignments, quizzes, calendars and additional motivational apps like badges. Moreover, the developers constantly add some additional functions like the opportunity to be connected to Google Drive.

In the FLM, there is a deliberate shift from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered approach, where in-class time is meant for exploring topics in greater depth and creating richer learning opportunities [10]. We find Edmodo quite beneficial in managing students’ project work. You can divide students into subgroups within a team focused on the same project, set the tasks, trace their performance, exchange information, and get feedback. The Library that is compiled by the teacher allows us to share links and documents with students. In “backpacks” students can organize, store and exchange their own resource materials. The calendar allows both the teacher and the student to manage time. Thus, student’s learning culture is developed.

With Edmodo we created and constantly upgrade our library of teaching materials and learning materials for students which include texts, U-tube video, screencasts, podcasts which I share with students and teachers by BYOD. We usually teach in large multilevel groups. Our Edmodo library helps us organize the content and deliver it in a variety of ways. For example, grammar presentation or listening practice can be done by students at home in the most convenient way to them while devoting class time to discussion or clarifying some details.

You can upload content and assignments for your students to access, allow students to share discussions and comments. Thus, you can interact with other students beyond your own classroom, which makes learning more personal and intentional.

And finally, using Edmodo helped us create personal learning network (PLN) and personal learning environment for students (PLE). Russian and foreign edmodians communicate, collaborate, share ideas and organize joint conferences. On the other hand, FLM help students become autonomous learners who are responsible for the process and the result of their study which implies that they are able to learn co-operatively, evaluate their own learning, identify their own strengths and weaknesses, identify their own strengths, and monitor their progress.

4 CONCLUSION

Thus, the innovation implies appropriate time frameworks and seeks to facilitate changes. It is contextually and culturally appropriate, and does not promote values, which are incongruent with those of implementers. [2]

In our practice we used a three-stage scheme of the innovation process, which embraces the following stages:

- creating innovation: the analysis of the educational needs; innovation design, expertise (analytical and motivational);
- disseminating innovation: preparation for implementation, innovation awareness (organizational-performing);
- developing innovation: introduction, evaluation, analysis of results, institutionalization of innovation (reflexive).

This approach has proved to be utterly efficient and tends to provide long-term benefits in foreign language teaching.

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