EFFECTIVENESS ASSESSMENT OF ONLINE COURSES FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT USING SWOT-ANALYSIS AND HOFSTEDE'S MODEL

A. Makhmutova
Kazan Federal University (RUSSIAN FEDERATION)

Abstract

The globalization of the world educational space is primarily aimed at the exchange of best learning practices of different countries. One important aspect is the use of online courses technologies, which have become an integral part of the global education system and our reality. In this regard, the study of a foreign language through online courses is seen as the most promising direction. This article discusses the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats inherent in online courses offering the study of foreign languages, using the method of SWOT analysis and Hofstede's six-dimension model to determine cultural preferences and habits in Russia. SWOT analysis showed effectiveness of introducing online courses for successful foreign language acquisition though Hofstede’s model demonstrated learning of foreign languages through online courses has both strengths (accessibility, comfort, flexibility, integration with traditional methods) and weaknesses. Moreover, there is still a lot of potential that has not been fully realized. However, according to Geert Hofstede’s theory, Russians mostly treat online courses with distrust due to high index of collectivism, power distribution inequality and uncertainty avoidance. These findings can be extrapolated to countries having similar indices and cultural and value systems as well as countries located nearby Russia.

Keywords: Russia, online course, foreign language acquisition, SWOT analysis, Hofstede’s model, cultural preferences, educational innovations.

1 INTRODUCTION

The term innovation comes from Latin novatio, which means ‘update’ (or ‘change’), and the prefix in-, which is translated as ‘in the direction of’. Thus, if translated literally innovatio is ‘in the direction of change’. In a broader sense, innovation refers to the result of pioneering work, embodied in a new or improved product; a new or improved technological process; a new approach to social or educational services. Accordingly, innovation in education is all that is associated with the introduction of advanced pedagogical practices.

The education today is aimed at the transfer of skills and competencies so that our citizens of tomorrow could cope with change in our increasingly globalised and changing world [12]. At the same time, changes and innovations in education also result from the contemporary era of development and societal demand for a new paradigm of education. Thus, innovative education technologies are changing the educational context, steering it towards computerization, autonomy, and individuality. On the other hand, people tend to be uptight about the unexplored and the unfamiliar, responding discouragingly to the changes [5]. This resistance to educational innovations lies in psychological sphere of individuals when change initiatives push them away from comfort zone, safety, and self-assertion.

Just as important, Handal and Lauvas [9], Claxton [8] and others have recognized that change in education, including foreign language teaching (FLT), will never be successful if it simply pinpoints on the behaviour of the stakeholders and neglects to study of the recipient culture. Similarly, the researchers stress that any change initiative for FLT projects needs to be founded on a baseline study of curriculum, methodology, textbooks and materials, and examinations [12]. Among other things, these four entry points of FLT innovations are in one very important sense a manifestation of the values, attitudes, beliefs, theories, and experience of those who design and deliver these behaviour and artefacts [1], [5], [12]. Bolitho states that potential for intercultural misunderstanding is not only in classroom practices but also in everything that underpins them, from societal and behavioural norms to authority structures, from values to language and the way the terminology is used. Jointly these features constitute ‘deep culture’ of any educational system which goes back a long way in history. If a change project does not penetrate into these deeper layers, it fails to succeed in the long term [12].
It is also from these deeper layers that resistance to change emanates. Whether in learners, teachers, or managers, resistance is always a likely response, especially in the early stages of a change initiative and most frequently among the more experienced and long-serving members of a teaching community [12]. When this is the case, cultural incompatibility manifests itself in ways: ‘We manage to forget, to cut off, the best things ever existing in our system of education and adopt the worst things from the West or wheresoever’ [12].

Modern education has specific requirements for the application of technologies, for the result is focused on real people [11]. As stated above the main objective of education today is to prepare student to cope with change in ever-changing world of technology and knowledge. Frequent use of information and communication technology contributes to fast access, search and exchange of information, transformation of cognitive activity and automation of work. The current education system is characterized by information revolution and growth of knowledge, complexity and extension of educational material. As a result traditional techniques gradually prove to be less effective, giving way to more advanced educational technologies, which are expected to increase the learner’s cognitive activity, motivation and creative initiatives [3]. Also in the context of modernization and digitization, educational technologies are projected to be more personalized.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Background

2.1.1 Problems in foreign language teaching for adult learner

Globalization, growth of international trade, diplomacy, governmental cooperation affect all spheres of life. Consequently, more and more adults have become attracted to studying foreign languages. However, adult learners find learning of foreign languages particularly demanding, partly due to prior unsuccessful attempts to learn a foreign language or to being constantly under time.

The first problem related to learning foreign language by adult learners is the psychological barrier. According to Estacio and Raga, learning a foreign language is psychologically difficult for students, especially for adults [13]. A trigger for such discomfort could be soaring ambitions due to high status or qualifications and they do not want to lower the personal bar [2]. Similarly, adult learners often set uncertain goals such as fluent speaking or speaking with no accent, errorless writing, etc. However, normally this is impossible even for native speakers [6]. These inappropriate objectives will often result either in excessive listening to English songs or in watching movies and, hence, in absolute ignorance of the language. In this regard, the instructor of the adult language learner from the very beginning should specify that a foreign language is nothing else than a mere means of communicating ideas and information.

The next main problem among adult students is the inability to think in the foreign language. Foreign language proficiency can be achieved only when a person begins to think in that language. [11]. Many students, especially grownups, think in their native language, translating their thoughts [4]. As Estacio and Raga stated, adult learners first relate together grammar rules, only then they utter the sentence and this could be tiring [13]. There are two ways to think in a foreign language – immersion into the language-speaking environment or control of thoughts, forcing yourself to utterance of words and phrases in the target language [3]. The former is more natural and can lead to thinking in a particular language while the latter is artificial. As Kaushik claimed, both methods have the right to exist, although with different efficiencies [2].

Infrequency of classes or lengthy breaks from the studies are two more obstacles in foreign language acquisition by adult learners. Independent learning is devoid of outside control, so it is easy to postpone a lesson, skip it, and finally abandon it [4]. Similarly, because of the workload most adult learners are unwilling to spend more time, thinking that twice-a-week classes will bring those results [13]. But according to Mapulanga, after some break in foreign language learning (FLL) one needs to start from scratch [11]. Moreover, students tend to forget much of the covered material and have to spend more time revising. Therefore, it is more productive to learn foreign language regularly, preferably every day [6].

Today, a two-stage system of higher education is being implemented all over the EU. The two-step system provides an excellent opportunity to get two degrees in six years and become more competitive in the labour market [2]. Master degree studies develop analytical and single-discipline competencies
preparing foundation for managerial or scientific careers. As Swoboda and Hirschmann claimed, master’s degree curricula are formed in a way that blurs the line between theory and practice [4]. Students examine real-life cases, focus on practical work and solve practice-like problems. From the above, we can see that master courses provide opportunity for either further education or a completely new professional direction. Similarly, the background knowledge of subjects can vary from student to student. And this is true for foreign languages too. Therefore, the challenge for the teacher here is to offer right and proper foreign language syllabi for master’s students, since the course should be motivating, further develop the learners’ skills and language proficiency [11].

First-year master students have different language level and learning experience; therefore, one of the actual tasks for university FL teacher is to design language courses to students with different language learning experience [13]. One of the most effective approaches is the split-up of students into beginners and non-beginners but this is not always possible [13]. In this connection, there is still another challenge for the language teacher, i.e. of ensuring psychological comfort so that the learners can realize their potential and make constant progress. In other words, the teacher ought to start with familiar stuff, gradually moving to more complex ones, all the way plunging the learners into self-study [2].

2.1.2 Instructional strategies for teaching EFL for adults

Researchers have identified eight Instructional strategies crucial for teaching adult learners, including FLT:

1 Adult students tend to study only those language aspects that they consider necessary to know. Adults exhibit a more practical approach to learning than children [6], i.e. adults study only those topics that are useful for their professional activities or everyday life.

2 The process of adult education is significantly influenced by prevailing experience. An adult perceives new knowledge in the context with life experience [3]. If the presented information conflicts with the student’s knowledge, then the former would likely to be rejected.

3 Adult students do not need to be evaluated; instead, they need to be given the right objectives and motivation. As stated in [11] the competition within a large or small team adversely affects adult learning. Adult students are more likely to drop out of classes due to the fear of public condemnation, as this may affect their reputation [13].

4 Adults must independently come to the point that they want to learn and to receive new information. They can subconsciously resist external pressure [3]. In other words, learning will be effective and efficient if only motivation to get new skills and master new opportunities is internal, i.e. comes from the inside. The desire to deepen knowledge may be stimulated externally, but it will not be much effective without intrinsic motivation.

5 It is needed to use several senses for faster and more effective perception and interiorisation of new skills [2], e.g., audios, videos, pictures and other visuals can harness new skills and consolidate established ones. For more productivity, greater involvement of the student into the lesson is necessary, and, in this regard, discussion and debates can be very useful [6].

6 Adult students receive most of their knowledge and competencies in the workplace. As claimed Estacio and Raga the imparted knowledge is usually forgotten by 80% in two years period if used irregularly [13]. But if there is an opportunity to consolidate new knowledge or skills in practice, they will be retained longer and more effectively.

7 Adult students are more open to the new in an informal setting than in a formal setting of traditional academic classes [3], since for most of them they remind school, home assignments and continuous assessments. Therefore, a more informal atmosphere for adult students is welcomed.

8 In learning, the focus should be on real and practice-like context [2]. For example, it is better to role-play the situations from real life or look for practical solution.

Thus, for adult learners, teaching the foreign language through their experience, practical knowledge, mutual confidence and understanding justifies itself.

2.1.3 Technologies in foreign language education

Humankind have been developed a great many of educational methods. Initially foreign languages methodology was designed to teach ‘dead languages’ as Latin and Greek and the learning focused on reading and translation mainly [6]. And even now the objective of most school and university curriculum content for foreign languages is rather introduction to the language system than the live language,
resembling learning the language in vitro instead of in vivo [3]. In other words, it is not the language that is taught, but a different subject telling about the foreign language by means of rules and examples. As Mapulanga claimed another major shortcoming of school or non-specific education is that they teach everything [11]. Often students of non-linguistic specialties do not feel need for a foreign language as a university subject. This gives rise to apathy and unwillingness to learn the language as well as a strong opinion that 95 percent of learning a foreign language is routine and hard work. However, this is not quite true. Foreign language methodology has been progressing along with society and nowadays mastering a foreign language can give far more interest and enthusiasm [3].

In recent years, FLT experts in collaboration with syllabus developers and language teachers focus on new methods and strategies. Educators in many countries analyse existing methods and technologies, their requirements and incorporation to modern realities. At the same time, they are looking for completely innovative approaches. There is still debate about what should be the process of learning a foreign language in modern education [13].

Present time is an era of computers. It implies that contemporary learners, regardless of age, are inclined to receive new information via computers and other digital devices [4]. Thus, creating familiar environment computer-assisted language learning could make foreign language acquisition easier. Due to multimedia resources, FLL can go outside the classroom and become incessant. As Lander notes, use of ICTs help students significantly improve their fluency in listening, reading, speaking [3].

Today, when it comes to learning a foreign language, students predominantly have two alternatives – traditional language courses or online courses. Both formats have their own advantages and give results, but now online option is believed to the best opportunity for FLL [11]. Kaushik claimed that in the past, learning a foreign language in the classroom was considered as the main way of learning and there were good reasons for that [2]. Classroom language practice allowed learning from qualified teachers, drilling various aspects of the language, and learning with the same level of groupmates. Nowadays high-quality online foreign language (FL) courses come with all these features offering a virtual classroom environment and reconstructing all the benefits of brick and mortar classes [3].

A few years ago, ICTs suffer certain limitations challenging their competitive performance with mainstream teaching, but now this is not the case [13]. For example, video calls or course-embedded audio files empower assessing pronunciation. Moreover, online foreign language courses offer a number of other pros such as customization, availability to anyone and from everywhere and schedule flexibility and these beneficially distinguish them from traditional ones.

From the above it can be concluded that the globalization of the educational space is aimed, as well, at the exchange of progressive instructional practices from all over the world. It becomes obvious today online language courses, which offer to some extent a revolutionary format and methodology of teaching and learning a foreign language, are one of the important areas in this line. However, online education and massive open online courses (MOOCs) are innovative practices imported to Russia from the western context. Therefore, to some degree, they are still alien to methodologists and those directly involved in educational process. Moreover, the culture for online foreign language learning might contradict with the mainstream culture of the school or university and the culture of the society. Thus, their introduction can potentially lead to certain conflict of values and objectives of both tutors and students of online courses.

Thus, many educators and researchers consider online education a revolutionary innovation, a new opportunity for learning and ability to democratize education systems [11]. But what opportunities and difficulties may be associated with the institutionalization of online education of foreign language? How can person improve online education and overcome its existing and potential problems (privatization, monetization, openness, plagiarism and limited opportunities for communication with professors)? This paper tries to respond to this questions discussing the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats inherent to foreign language online courses (FLOCs) in Russia using SWOT analysis and Hofstede’s model of measuring cultures. The focus of the research is to identify strengths of FLOCs and willingness of Russian students to accept this educational format and technology. For the analysis, we used modern Russian and foreign studies and surveys in both online education and FLOCs in particular. All the inspected studies are dated 2012-2018.

### 2.2 SWOT analysis

The conception of SWOT as an analytical tool came to education from strategic planning. It implies dividing factors and phenomena into four categories: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.
Initially SWOT-analysis was focused on presenting and structuring data / knowledge regarding current situations and tendencies. Since SWOT-analysis did not use economic categories it was further applied to any organizations, individuals or nations for strategic planning in various aspects of life and human activity. It helps objectively assess strengths and weaknesses of a step taken or a future step, allows identifying shortcomings and find ways to solve them [7]. An analysis usually represents 4 quadrants that demonstrate factors to increase the competitiveness of the investigated direction due to the strengths, to reduce threats from external factors and effectively use opportunities in further development. The overall procedure of the SWOT-analysis implies developing a matrix juxtaposing strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the market. This comparison enables further developmental actions or immediate solutions of problems.

In our research, Table 1 summarizes the factors identified for FLOCs and represents them in order of priority in the categories of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Strengths and weaknesses characterize the state of the internal environment at the time of analysis. The remaining aspects - threats and opportunities - relate to the external environment in which the research takes place and on which a person cannot directly influence [7].

Table 1. SWOT analysis of foreign language online courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal approach to students</td>
<td>Clients’ wishes are not always taken into account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time saving</td>
<td>Wrong group formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal access to information</td>
<td>Institutional conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low barriers to learning</td>
<td>Strict requirements for student self-organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>Heavy loads</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wide choice of topics and specializations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexible schedule</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constantly updated material</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative and interactive education model</td>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint activities of students</td>
<td>&quot;Disruptive Innovation&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development and availability of technology</td>
<td>Business model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rethinking simple course values</td>
<td>The emergence of new technologies</td>
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2.2.1 Strengths

The greatest strength of online courses is the personal approach to each student. The approach is based on learners’ attitudes, abilities, competencies, academic performance and preferences. Online courses offer a wide choice of language aspects, subjects and specializations that students can take in the foreign language [7]. Thus, each student can choose not only the language course but similarly are enrolled for any job-related subjects in the foreign language. Thus, online courses can contribute to immersion into the language.

One more strong point of online courses is that they significantly save time of both students and teachers. This is due to the possibility of giving and having an online lesson anywhere and anytime [2]. In this way, time is not wasted on commuting. Frequently, the online class schedule can be much easier tuned to the learner’s schedule as most activities are not strictly time-bound and depend entirely on the student’s self-discipline and time-management. And as our analysis implies it is an inherent opportunity of balancing job and studies or of studying for promotion or requalification with no time loss that most researchers put forward as the most important advantage for busy adult learners who do not want or cannot afford to leave work for several years to get their diplomas [2].

Since an important component of the learning process is the teacher’s information about the volume of knowledge gained by students, as well as the level of formation of new skills. In this regard, the online learning format is able to provide much more information for the teacher than the traditional form. For example, with traditional education, it is still quite difficult to determine how much time has been spent to solve a particular task, how many unsuccessful attempts have been taken, and what questions have
been the most difficult. It is even more difficult to determine how much time a student needs to realize the problem is being solved incorrectly. The resources of online platforms can provide these statistics automatically, and, therefore, the tutor has a more accurate picture of the learning outcomes.

2.2.2 Weaknesses

Various institutional conflicts may arise due to the introduction of online courses in universities and changes in the educational system – the results of so-called “disruptive innovation” [11]. Another frequently mentioned minus is that online education involves a much greater burden than stationary type of education [11]. Even though online learning implies a good level of self-discipline, the ability to distribute forces and optimize schedules or timetables, students, as stated in [2], often combine learning with full-time work, family responsibilities and household chores [2].

Al-Qallaf focuses on weaknesses of foreign language online-courses. First, online foreign language learning takes more time to deal with learning materials and tasks while [6], since it requires more concentration during classes. Also there is a constant challenge to look up the social network or just close the browser tab. Second, training programs and courses may not be well developed due to the fact that there are not so many qualified specialists who are able to create them.

2.2.3 Opportunities

A primary opportunity in the format of online courses is a shift from the teacher-centered model "a professor gives lectures to students" to a more collaborative and interactive model in which global interaction can occur [11]. The shift of the learning focus may happen due to the teacher jointing students’ activities. Moreover, opportunities opening up with technology development allow making education more personalized and responsive to student’s goals and needs [2].

The value is in rethinking of certificate-free online-courses and university diploma online-courses and in rethinking the very role of the university as an element of the educational system. Online education is closely related to information technology, being, to some degree, a part of them [11]. For this reason, most of emerging opportunities in information technology are quickly finding their use in e-learning, which tend to adopt them much faster than other formats of training.

2.2.4 Threats

According to most researchers, the main threat to online education is related to the quality of online courses offered. Obviously, to determine the quality of education, additional parameters are needed, namely, how the quality of the course will be assessed and how it will be perceived by the creators, the teachers of the courses, and the users-learners.

The next threat is related to the phenomenon of “disruptive innovation”. Today, in online FL education the situation with disruptive innovations is that a growing number of people are creating their own foreign language courses using modern technologies, as well as individual (author’s) teaching methodology. Once these courses may eventually replace similar university courses. A possible outcome of this process may be further competition between universities and online single teachers, the results of which can be both positive and negative for the modern system of teaching foreign languages. In the meantime, the business model of online courses will not be developed with the aim of making a profit; universities will continue to consider them as add-ons to basic, “traditional” courses [11].

Thus, the SWOT-analysis of FLOCs shows the effectiveness of introducing online courses into the modern education system. As we can see from the matrix above, for the present time strengths and opportunities outnumber weaknesses and threats. Likewise, they will be most effective and productive for adult students, i.e. master’s students.

2.3 Hofstede’s study

At the same time, it is preferable to look at the effectiveness of introducing online courses from cultural preferences and habits in Russia. For this purpose, we use Geert Hofstede’s theory of measurement of cultures, which can give a systematic basis for assessing differences between nations and cultures [10]. The theory is based on the idea that value can be distributed across six dimensions of culture. These dimensions include power (equality against inequality), collectivism (against individualism), avoiding uncertainty (against tolerance for uncertainty), masculinity (against femininity), strategic thinking and self-indulgence (against restraint) [10].

This typology is considered the most standard one since it employs a set of universal parameters suitable for analyzing any organizational cultures, regardless of the country or wider cultural context they operate in [5]. Cultures of different organizations may differ from each other in practical approaches, while national cultures differ in values. Values are the first things children learn. They are supported by the local environment both in education and at work [5]. Figure 1 demonstrates the results of Hofstede’s study for Russia.

![Figure 1. Graph of Hofstede’s study.](image)

### 2.3.1 Power Distance

According to Hofstede, “distance from power is the extent to which members of organizations and institutions (for example, families) with relatively lesser power expect and allow for uneven distribution of power” [13]. A high index power distance in Russia means that members of the society with less authority take their place and are aware of the existence of formal hierarchical structures. This index is effectively presents that in Russia a teacher has a conditional power in the eyes of students. The introduction of online courses in Russia will not affect the level of influence of the teacher on the students, since this is being influenced by the cultural values of the country. For example, students value comfort, but view an authoritarian approach as a social norm.

### 2.3.2 Individualism

Individualism is the form of the degree to which members of a society tend to form groups. In societies that are characterized by collectivism, such as in Russia, social goals and welfare are put above personal ones [10]. As mentioned above, online courses offer a format of group activities or even group projects. Thus, students in Russia will work with great diligence on collective work and tasks than on individual tasks. For example, students in Russia find it less socially acceptable to pursue their own goals without caring about others [10]. Similarly, students are guided in life by the dictates of duty.

### 2.3.3 Masculinity

Masculinity and femininity are behaviors adopted by a particular society, which are conditioned by cultural and historical ideas. Hofstede’s research shows that cultures with a predominance of femininity index teach modesty and obedience, maintaining harmonious relationships with others, following moral and ethical standards of behavior. Students do not want to stand out, preferring to be like everyone else. Neither do they strive to achieve high results. The main thing is to learn to adapt to the society, maintain good relations in the team. Therefore, teachers are valued for their social qualities and friendliness [10]. Given this factor, it can be assumed that the introduction of online courses may encounter certain difficulties in Russia, because the value of personal relationships can be lost in e-learning. Lack of direct contact and interaction, manifestation of immediate emotions and feelings can alienate many learners from online courses. However, all this can be compensated with the introduction of real-time communication technologies. Face-to-face communication that involves both group mates and the teacher is valued high when learning a foreign language in Russia [13].
2.3.4 Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is societal tolerance to uncertainty and changes [10]. Cultures like Russia, for which this index is high, are less tolerant of changes and tend to avoid anxiety that uncertainty brings to them by setting strict rules, regulations and/or laws [13]. Since the introduction of online courses in the education is an innovation, and then there may be problems. Teachers can reject these changes, since they challenge the well-established system including lesson formats, teaching materials, examinations and student-teacher interactions. There may also be rejections of students. They may be wary of innovation and it will be difficult for them to unleash their full potential.

2.3.5 Long-term orientation

Long-term orientation describes the time horizon of the society [13]. In Russia, time is considered as a vector, and people tend to look forward to the future more than at the present time or back to the past. Such a society is focused on achieving goals and appreciates the results [10]. Thus, for Russians it is much more important to learn something new now in order to achieve something new then. Consequently, students are always ready to learn and receive new knowledge and skills to be ready for future changes.

Thus, the Hofstede’s analysis shows that overall Russians will favorably take a new direction in foreign language learning, namely, online courses. Nevertheless, some national peculiarities may pose some difficulties with the implementation of online education. Thus, when organising online courses, one should consider national peculiarities of learners and their imparted habits. This will help to consolidate the learning process in a more efficient way.

3 RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

From the above, it becomes clear that online courses have already become an important part of the world educational system and our reality. It is impossible to ignore that type of education. In this connection FLOC is the most promising direction providing great potential for both students and teachers. By now, advantages of FLOCs are maximum accessibility, comfort, flexibility and integration with different traditional methods. And there is a lot of potential that has not been fully realized so far. However, according to Geert Hofstede’s study, due to some national characteristics such as collectivism, a positive attitude towards the hierarchy, a high level of uncertainty avoidance and femininity, Russians are more likely to treat FLOCs with anxiety and distrust. Countries with similar indices may face the same problems, for example, countries that are located next to Russia.

REFERENCES


