INTEGRATING THE USE OF INSTAGRAM IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO NON-LINGUISTIC STUDENTS

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Abstract

Social networks have become an integral part of modern life having moved from platforms predominantly confined to individuals exchanging personal information to media widely used by businesses, not-for-profit organizations and even politicians. The authors consider that integration of Instagram into teaching a foreign language to non-linguistic students increases students' motivation and facilitates the acquisition and correct application of lexical and grammatical structures in productive oral and written speech. A pilot project that involved extensive and explicit use of Instagram to enhance both classroom and extracurricular activities was launched at Plekhanov Russian University of Economics in order to prove the hypothesis. In the framework of the research, a group of university instructors and undergraduate students of Marketing and Management departments used Instagram to provide guidelines, share resources and practice oral and written responses. After a two-year trial period, a survey was conducted to measure students’ satisfaction levels and general engagement in the educational process. Moreover, a higher level of foreign language competence was observed in the groups that used Instagram in comparison with control groups.

Keywords: Innovation, technology, blog, speaking, writing, Instagram, communicative competences.

1 INTRODUCTION

The modern system of higher education functions in the conditions of constant changes and the need for innovations. Current trends in the development of foreign language teaching in tertiary education entail new requirements for teaching methods and, moreover, the international orientation and the introduction of a new educational paradigm in national universities implies creating new curricula, assessment techniques, new technologies for organizing and optimizing student autonomy.

At the other end of the spectrum the development of social networks strongly influenced the communication between companies and their customers: Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram have become a platform for promoting and selling goods and services, a channel of communication and information flow. Therefore, effective communication in social networks can be especially important for young professionals working in the areas of marketing, advertising, public relations. Despite the requirements of the Federal State Educational Standard, the syllabi of foreign language courses in Russian universities do not yet include new written communication formats, such as blogs on Instagram or other social networks.

The results of the analysis of the existing academic studies have demonstrated a great interest in the use of blogs in teaching foreign languages. In addition, the methodology of the problem seems well developed, since the basis for the introduction of blog technologies in the educational process is the actualization of basic approaches, such as the learner-centered approach to training and education [1; 2]; communicative approach [3]; as well as leading methodological concepts, such as the theory of computer-mediated learning [4]; the concept of the didactic environment of the Internet [5]; the concept of computer linguodidactics [6]; computer-information model of teaching foreign languages [7]; theory of the use of social services Web 2.0 in teaching [8].

It should be noted that many Russian and international researchers were involved in exploring the theory of teaching though blogging technology [1-12]. Thus, its methodological basis is described in the process of learning a foreign language at school and at a linguistic university, but the aforementioned analysis has not identified any studies aimed at using Instagram social network as a platform for student blogs in the course of business English in non-linguistic universities (in the aspect of the formation and development of the productive foreign language skills), which served the stimulus for writing this article.
2 METHODOLOGY

In the course of learning a foreign language, a student should form skills in four types of speech activity - listening / speaking / reading / writing. In the methodology of teaching a professionally-oriented foreign language, these aspects are classified into receptive and productive skills. Receptive skills are aimed at obtaining information from third-party sources (listening and reading), and productive skills are focused on speaking and writing performance.

The opportunities created by Instagram make it possible to work effectively on the formation of productive types of speech activity, since the functionality of the application implies the creation of posts in writing or in video format. Below is an example of how extracurricular activities can be carried out using a blog on the Instagram network.

Third-year students of Marketing department at Plekhanov Russian University of Economics were assigned a task of writing posts in a separate Instagram blog in English during one semester. The aim of this activity was to form students' writing skills in the scope of e-marketing. Students formed groups of four people and started a blog on the topic of their choice. The total number of the students was 53 and the total number of blogs created was 12.

Taking into account the fact that marketers and advertising managers have to work with the whole range of products and services, the main aim of the project was to teach students the specific format of professional communication with the target audience via social networks, develop the skills of attracting and retaining readers and followers and maintaining the right level of register throughout the whole blog. The chosen topics varied and the most common were travelling, national cuisine, cinema and literature, music, lifestyle, learning a foreign language. Students were instructed on blogs and every post was assessed according to the criteria:

1. the structure and the content of the material;
2. the dynamics and the consistency of the topic throughout the blog;
3. independence of judgments;
4. contact and interaction with the audience;
5. grammar and vocabulary;
6. the right register;
7. frequency and continuity of communication;
8. creativity of visual design.

The other experiment lasted three semesters and involved second-year Bachelor students and first-year Master students of Management and Business departments at Plekhanov Russian University of Economics. Students majoring in Management created posts in Instagram under a common hashtag #becaptainsofrussia. Differentiated approach has been adopted for mixed-ability students. The tasks varied according to the levels:

a) A1-A2 – record an interview with a foreign guest during the World Cup, 2018 (development of intercultural competence), videos about life and hobbies;
b) A2-B1 – record a job interview, video blog about a business project;
c) B1-B2 – record a commercial, video presentations on the topics of «Management», «Marketing», «Finance»;
d) B2-C1 (Master students) – record negotiations, videoconference/ online meeting according to the prescribed roles.

A video blog often becomes the only opportunity for distant learning students to practice speaking. For example, Master students, who participate in additional educational programs, rank high in the level of absenteeism, but have a chance to maintain contact with their teacher and other group mates, doing individual tasks and group presentations online.
3 RESULTS

3.1 Writing skills

When analyzing written texts in students’ posts in Instagram, a number of problems were noted in the students' speech:

1 Lack of interaction with the audience. Students who have some experience in writing reports, memos and letters automatically transferred the formal and often impersonal nature of business correspondence to the social network. Preference was given to the passive voice; students avoided the use of personal pronouns. It was often unclear what type of reader this or that post was addressed to (@2marketing_and_travel).

2 Fragmentary expressions. Some posts, especially those devoted to films, books, music and interesting places resembled reviews. The texts lacked both cohesion and coherence within one post and at the same time sequence of ideas within a series of posts. Moreover, there was no chronological connection between posts and the current events in the world (@soulofmoscow, @time_to_movie).

3 Low competence of students in the issues covered. There was a tendency of either retelling standardized and superficial judgments (@howimetmymillion), or to deepen into the theory (@smm_lynx).

4 A high error count. Perceiving a blog on Instagram as an informal written format, students paid much less attention to spelling, lexical and grammar accuracy. Errors could also be provoked by the fact that most of the students relied on automatic spell checking on mobile devices, neglecting their own text alignment (@_taste_world_).

After the publication, students received personal comments from the teacher, and the most frequently encountered were covered in the relevant section of the teacher's blog. By the end of the course, progress was marked in almost all groups.

Thus, the main writing skills developed during the work with blogs can be considered the following:

1 the ability to establish contact with the target audience, ask rhetorical questions and give relevant examples;
2 the ability to formulate own judgments and opinions, attract the readers to one’s side, encourage the audience to take certain actions (@have.less_get.more - a minimalist style against consumerism);
3 the construction of a logical and consistent statement;
4 the use of correct register, the ability to determine the desired level of formality of communication;
5 accurate use of lexical and grammar structures.

3.2 Speaking skills

In the course of this research we have observed that not only does such method allow to track the progress in written speech but it is also effective in assessing improvements in oral speech. A student who has a portfolio with video records has a chance to compare the earlier versions with every subsequent step. It also facilitates for the teacher prompt error correction in open or private comments.

It is worth mentioning that the oral performance in students’ video blogs differed significantly from that in the classroom. Consequently, it proves that a video blog plays an important role in achieving the main didactic aim – acquisition of new lexical and grammar patterns. During the recording and editing process students typically make more than one take to create a higher quality video. In their pursuit of perfect results and a wish to create a really good post learners experience positive “side” effects: retaining the new vocabulary, practicing intonation and pronunciation, achieving fluency. All these benefits are not an end in itself but occur in a more natural way, through creativity and entertainment.

It is a well-known fact that learners are likely to memorize fun and entertaining experiences, therefore the value of a video blog raises no doubts. Even though for some of the students a task to make a video post in English may seem an overwhelming and a daunting experience, in the course of work...
the discomfort and fear of speaking in front of a wide internet audience decreases at the expense of an entertaining element. The room for creative and innovative designs in Instagram allows compensating for the lack of verbal means of expression. Furthermore learners with fresh-thinking and vivid imagination often go beyond task limitations, including music, special effects, attracting other participants including foreigners, which promotes authentic communication.

Upon reflecting on their progress, the students admitted that starting a video blog allowed them to overcome the language barrier and obtain a unique form of self-expression that influences directly the formation of speaking skills. Apparently, a personal blog has a strong emotional impact on the learner increasing the meaning and the value of studied materials, emphasizing the realistic aspect of learning

Social networks allow teachers to extend the speaking practice further and take it outside the classroom, which is especially relevant for lower-level students, whose progress is visualized in the growing number of followers. Course evaluation forms showed that the levels of student satisfaction improved greatly.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Having analysed students’ Instagram blogs, we have outlined three major formats: written blog, video blog and a combination of the two formats that combined the benefits of the first two. Overall Instagram has proved to be a highly motivational tool that allows stimulating and nurturing students’ interest for continuous learning. The majority of the students (75%) demonstrated active involvement in blogging, receiving feedback from teachers and peers. The fresh format and uniqueness of this approach allow for the deployment of creativity and self-expression. At the same time a certain degree of competitiveness and cooperation within a group increases motivation and meaningfulness of success.

The results of this research show that starting an English blog has a great significance in eliminating the language barrier and conquering the fear of public speaking. The newly formed writing and speaking skills may be useful in professional activities of future marketers, advertising and public relations specialists, who may have to write not only electronic marketing content but also leaflets, advertisements and short articles.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank our students of Marketing, Business and Management departments for their full commitment and active involvement in this pilot project. We are immensely grateful for their creativity in completing assignments and all the inspiration they have given us in the course of this research.

REFERENCES

