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Coordinative and communicative potential of using personal digital devices for foreign-language projects at a language university

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Importance. Personal digital devices, which have spread significantly over the last decade, are now becoming an integral element of social life, including its educational aspect. At the same time, traditionally such devices are more often perceived as a factor that impedes learning. However, the expanding functionality of personal digital devices presents a number of opportunities for optimizing the educational process. The purpose of the research is to summarize the existing experience in employing personal digital devices in the context of a foreign language course and to propose a number of scenarios for the coordinating and compensating use of such devices in the implementation of educational project activities.

Research Methods. This study is based on an expert approach, which allows, based on the analysis of the body of scientific works and relying on theoretical research methods, such as systematization, synthesis, classification and generalization, to highlight problems that have not found a proper solution among the presented works. The research materials were the works of domestic and foreign specialists in the field of foreign language teaching methods and language didactic.

Results and Discussion. The study of current views on the issues of using personal digital devices in the context of a university foreign language course made it possible to identify productive directions for turning to such devices when implementing educational project activities. Highlighted are scenarios of coordinating and compensating use of personal digital devices within the framework of a foreign language course. The research identifies a number of features and formats of coordinating educational interaction using personal digital devices. The research highlights remedial and complementary formats for the compensatory use of personal digital devices when presenting educational presentations within the framework of a university foreign language course.

Conclusion. Despite the traditionally wary attitude towards personal digital devices in the context of foreign language classes, there are a number of productive scenarios for their use. Such scenarios apply to both in-class and extracurricular educational work, each of which is an integral element of the implementation of project activities within the framework of a foreign language course. When used rationally and scientifically within a foreign language course, personal digital devices can compensate for a number of technical limitations, and in addition, help facilitate multimodal and multimedia coordination interactions between students working on an educational project. This reveals the coordinating and compensating nature of the use of personal

digital devices when implementing foreign language project activities in the context of a language university.

Keywords: foreign language learning, personal digital devices, mobile devices, projects, presentations, communicative language teaching

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Координирующий и компенсирующий характер использования персональных цифровых устройств в иноязычной проектной деятельности в языковом вузе

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Актуальность. Распространившиеся в последнее десятилетие персональные цифровые устройства сегодня становятся неотъемлемым элементом социальной жизни, а вместе с ней и образовательного ее аспекта. При этом традиционно подобные устройства чаще воспринимаются как фактор, препятствующий учебе. Тем не менее расширяющийся функционал персональных цифровых устройств представляет ряд возможностей для оптимизации образовательного процесса. Цель исследования – обобщение существующего опыта обращения к персональным цифровым устройствам в контексте иноязычного курса и предложение ряда сценариев координирующего и компенсирующего использования таких устройств при реализации учебной проектной деятельности.

Материалы и методы. Данное исследование опирается на экспертный подход, позволяющий на основе анализа корпуса научных работ и с опорой на теоретические методы исследования, такие как систематизация, синтез, классификация и обобщение, осветить проблемы, не нашедшие должного решения среди представленных работ. В качестве материалов исследования были использованы труды отечественных и зарубежных специалистов в области методики иноязычного обучения и лингводидактики.

Результаты исследования. Проведенное изучение актуальных взглядов на проблематику использования персональных цифровых устройств в контексте вузовского иноязычного курса позволило идентифицировать продуктивные направления обращения к таким устройствам при реализации учебной проектной деятельности. Выделены сценарии координирующего и компенсирующего использования персональных цифровых устройств в рамках иноязычного курса. Определен ряд особенностей и форматов координирующей учебной интеракции при помощи персональных цифровых устройств. Выделены ремедиальный и комплементарный форматы компенсирующего использования персональных

цифровых устройств при представлении учебных презентаций в рамках вузовского иноязычного курса.

Выводы. Несмотря на традиционно-настороженное отношение к персональным цифровым устройствам в контексте иноязычного занятия, существует ряд продуктивных сценариев их использования. Подобные сценарии относятся как к аудиторной, так и внеаудиторной учебной работе, каждая из которых является неотъемлемым элементом реализации проектной деятельности в рамках курса по иностранному языку. При рациональном и научно обоснованном использовании в контексте иноязычного курса персональные цифровые устройства позволяют компенсировать ряд ограничений технического характера, а кроме того, способствуют облегчению мультимодальных и мультимедийных координационных взаимодействий между студентами, работающими над учебным проектом. В этом проявляется координирующий и компенсирующий характер использования персональных цифровых устройств при реализации иноязычной проектной деятельности в контексте языкового вуза.

Ключевые слова: иноязычное обучение, персональные цифровые устройства, мобильные устройства, проектная деятельность, презентация, коммуникативное обучение

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IMPORTANCE

When organizing the process of foreign language teaching in accordance with the requirements of the modern time, it is necessary to take into account the transforming influence of information technologies and services on the educational environment. The digital transformation affects not only society and the educational sphere as a whole, but also influences the peculiarities of modern foreign language teaching. Thus, on the one hand, we deal with the changing interaction between teacher and learners. The historically established format of interaction, implying such interaction exclusively within the walls of an educational institution, is now moving towards revision. This is facilitated by the emergence of various means of interaction in the digital space, such as messengers, social networks and other communicative platforms. Certainly, these are just handy tools, different aspects of which can be used by educators as need-

ed, depending on their teaching style, pedagogical philosophy and the specifics of interaction with a particular group of students.

In turn, interaction in the digital space implies the use of personal digital devices, which become an integral element of operating in modern society. At the same time, the attitude towards such electronic devices in the educational context is traditionally ambiguous. They are often perceived as an undesirable hindrance in the organization of the learning process or as a distracting factor in a foreign language class, negatively affecting its pace. Nevertheless, a number of modern studies in the field of language didactics and foreign language teaching suggest various ways of using personal digital devices in a productive way. The study summarizes the existing experience of using personal digital devices in a foreign language course and proposes promising scenarios for coordinative and compensative use of such devices with special attention to the context of project work.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on the expert approach, which allows to analyze the corpus of scientific works and rely on theoretical research methods such as systematization, synthesis, classification and generalization to highlight the problems that have not been adequately solved among the existing scholarly research. The works of domestic and foreign specialists in the field of foreign language teaching method and language didactics were used as research materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the important aspects of successful foreign language teaching is the coordinated interaction between teacher and students, aimed at achieving the set educational goals and objectives. Such interaction both between the teacher and students and among students becomes very important while implementing project work within the framework of a foreign language course. The features and strengths of the method of projects are thoroughly described in the works of E.S. Polat. Among the main requirements for the use of the project method the researcher emphasizes:

- 1) presence of a significant problem/task in the research-creative plan;
- 2) practical, theoretical and cognitive significance of the expected results;
- 3) independent (individual, pair, group) activity of students;
- 4) structuring the content of the project (indicating step-by-step results);
- 5) the use of research methods, providing the following sequence of actions, including: definition of the problem and the resulting research tasks; hypothesis of their solution; discussion of research methods; discussion of the ways to design the final

results; collection, systematization and analysis of the obtained data; summarizing, design of results and their presentation; conclusions, proposing new research problems [1, p. 69].

It is important to remember that project activity implies a combination of learning interactions both in and out of the classroom. Productive independent work of students here turns out to be the most important aspect of projectwork, largely determining its success. Thus, E.S. Polat emphasizes that often “projects can begin in the classroom and then continue outside the classroom until the necessary results are obtained. Project defense (its presentation) is also conducted in class” [1, p. 103]. Since E.S. Polat speaks here primarily about working with projects in a foreign language class at school, her observations can be supplemented with some other formats relevant to a language university. It is well known that the age and professional peculiarities of university students determine a wider range of their activities associated with the learning process or conditioned by it. Here we can single out participation in various cultural events on and off university campus, student conferences, symposiums, etc. In other words, project activities in the context of a higher education institution often go beyond the foreign language class and language course, which serves as an additional motivating factor in project work. For example, the capstone of a project can be its presentation at a city cultural evening, a presentation at a student scientific conference, putting online an educational website, screening of a foreign-language movie with subtitles made by students, and so on. Thus, it is obvious that there is a very wide variability of project activities in higher education.

It should be reminded that, according to E.S. Polat’s typology, projects are distin-

guished by the activity dominating in the project. One may distinguish between the following types of projects:

- research (these projects have a structure that resembles that of a scientific research);
- creative (in such projects the joint activity of the participants is subordinated to the nature of the resulting project);
- role-playing and game projects (in these projects participants assume certain roles in accordance with the nature and content of the project);
- familiarization-oriented or informational projects (focused on gathering information about a particular phenomenon);
- practice-oriented or applied (their peculiarity is determined by their clearly defined result) [1, p. 72-74]. Despite its diversity, it should be noted that in general, project work contributes to the formation of both professional and universal competencies in students. I.E. Abramova and E.P. Shishmolina highlight the following advantages of project work in the framework of “foreign language” discipline: individualization of learning by taking into account the language and speech needs of students; stimulation of their cognitive motivation; intensification of students’ learning activities while preserving their subjectivity; adequacy of realization of students’ potential; active character of learning that contributes to the formation of skills and abilities underlying universal and professional competences of students [2, p. 78]. Since, as noted above, in a number of cases project work implies results that are not limited to the foreign language course itself (for example, creating an educational website or a group in social networks in a foreign language on a given topic; creating and posting a video in a foreign language; preparing and

delivering a presentation in the target language at a public event, etc.), the above advantages can also be complemented by a motivating sense of satisfaction of students that is due to the tangible results of project activities.

At the same time, we should pay attention to the fact that in modern conditions project activities are becoming more and more dependent on information technologies. On the one hand, this makes it possible to facilitate coordinative interactions between participants and make such interactions more flexible and, consequently, potentially more productive. On the other hand, projects themselves can be developed and implemented in the digital environment. A representative example of this is a variety of Internet projects, which are discussed in detail in the work of P.V. Sysoyev [3]. The researcher draws attention to the key role of the educator in relation to Internet projects, as the success of their implementation is closely related to the monitoring activity of students’ independent work by the teacher [3, p. 53].

Here it is important to remember that the realization of projects requires both a certain level of competence of the participants and sufficient technical equipment that allows to implement the project work. The significant role of extracurricular work on the educational project implies the remote nature of interaction between students working on the project, on the one hand, and monitoring by the teacher, on the other [3, p. 21]. However, here students often face objective difficulties. Technological solutions and services that students can use in the university are not always available outside its walls. This, in turn, can negatively affect the course of work on the project, its timing and the effectiveness of solving the

tasks. Depending on the type of activity implied by a project, such limiting factors may be limited, significant or critical.

Personal digital devices (smartphones, tablets, laptops) have a well-known potential for facilitating the project work. On the one hand, today they are crucial means of communication and operation in the digital space that become important factors of coordination between participants working on educational projects. Without such coordination, it is already difficult to imagine the successful realization of an educational project. It is well known that group work in the context of a foreign language course implies the possibility and even the necessity of assigning the roles of participants in the group [4, p. 39]. As the project progresses and depending on the format of interaction (in-class, out-of-class, hybrid; synchronous, asynchronous, combined) at different stages of the project, the roles assigned may change. This, in turn, requires increased flexibility in coordinative interactions, which today have both multimodal and multimedia nature [5, pp. 1185-1188].

Let us consider some global advantages of using personal digital devices in project activities. Employing modern digital and communicative technologies, which implies using (or possibility of using) personal digital devices, has a coordinative and compensative potential here. The **coordinative potential** of personal digital devices is manifested in the possibility of a more flexible organization of educational group interaction that meets the requirements of individualized learning. In the framework of project activities, teachers and students can choose different formats of interactions, which are multimodal due to the features of the digital environment in which they take place. Here, **multimodality** is understood as the possibility of organizing communicative interaction

that is both symbolic and non-symbolic. In other words, multimodality implies the possibility of communicative interaction between students not only by verbal means, but also by nonverbal ones, which determines the holistic nature of the act of communicative interaction [5–7]. Thus, such educational communication in digital space not only resembles real communication, in which the verbal aspect is not separated from the non-verbal, but also offers additional, parallel tools of communicative interaction [8; 9]. For example, a digital conference created in an online telephony service is often supplemented by a text chat as an integral element of the conference, but may also be complemented by messages in messengers. Moreover, such interaction can be **multimedia** (in the original sense of the word), i.e., it can take place in several media [5, p. 1188; 10, p. 24; 11, p. 27-28]. An example of this can be the work on a project, when in a complex synchronous-asynchronous interaction some students work in a shared physical space, interact with other group members present remotely through video telephony, and use information from students involved in project work in asynchronous format. These examples demonstrate the complicated nature of communicative learning interaction in the era when digital transformation affects modern society and learning space.

In addition, such use of personal digital devices here implies overcoming objective limitations of spatial, temporal, technological and technical nature, that can limit comprehensive use of modern technologies in foreign language learning that meets modern requirements [11–13]. This is where the **compensating** potential of digital devices is manifested. The compensating character of their use in the classroom space is most obvious under circumstances when, for one

reason or another, the classroom cannot be equipped with a sufficient number of technical means that are necessary in the educational process. In a number of scenarios, personal digital devices can offset this problem and replace a missing technical device (projector with a computer connected to it, digital TV or display, etc.). Some scenarios of compensatory use of personal digital devices in a foreign language class will be described in more detail below.

For a detailed consideration of the peculiarities of the coordinative and compensative potential of personal digital devices in modern foreign-language teaching, let us turn to the exemplary scenarios of their use in project activities such as joint work on abstracting and analyzing authentic foreign-language texts and group work on a presentation. It should be noted here that these scenarios can refer to both different projects and be elements of a single project. Let us consider each of these scenarios in more detail.

An important element in the implementation of an educational project is the initial collection of material, which involves working on authentic foreign-language texts, including scientific texts – articles, book chapters, reviews, etc. Such work can be carried out with the help of various digital services, both those specifically designed for educational purposes (e.g. Perusall) and those that are not exclusively educationally oriented, but nevertheless allow for convenient collaborative work on a group or individual project or a text in the target language as an element of project work (various online services that allow synchronous and asynchronous work with documents and educational texts in digital space). Among other advantages of such an organization of interaction in the digital environment that solves educational tasks, we can highlight student-centricity and flexibility. Student-centered-

ness is manifested in the fact that the dialogue between the teacher and students has a more direct character, which is consistent with the general principles of communicative language teaching and at the same time contributes to a more effective solution of educational tasks [13, p. 67-69; 14]. Flexibility, on the other hand, is manifested in the fact that students find themselves less constrained by spatial and temporal factors. In addition, students' interaction with personal digital devices in the learning context becomes a personalized experience [15, p. 12]. This, in turn, has a positive effect on motivation to perform the task, because for students their own smartphone, tablet or laptop is a part of their personal and personalized digital space. This leads to confidence and familiarity with their own digital devices: students can focus on the task rather than first trying to get used to the features of a device that does not belong to them (e.g., a public computer in a classroom, a tablet or laptop owned by the institution and loaned out for short-term use, etc.). Describing the current trends in the use of digital devices in education, S. Hartle suggests that today these devices are becoming one of the participants of the learning process and its integral element [16].

In addition, working on educational tasks on joint familiarization, commenting and abstracting of an educational text in the target language can be performed both in synchronous and asynchronous modes. In the former case, the instructor and students schedule a specific time period which they use to work together on the text. The instructor may ask questions (mostly in writing, commenting on certain aspects of the text), and the students try to answer them while communicating with each other in the digital space using the target language. It should be emphasized that such communication can be

written or oral, synchronous or asynchronous. This stems from the very features of modern personal digital devices and potential scenarios of their use. If we are talking about written communicative interaction in the target language to solve a clearly defined educational task, which implies group work in **synchronous** format, implying working with an educational document or text, students have the opportunity to ask questions in written printed form and receive answers both from classmates and, if necessary, from the instructor. Thus, here we are dealing with the co-operative nature of teaching, in which the teacher is also involved. When choosing such a format, there is a potential for building not only formal, but also more trusting relations between the teacher and students. However, there is no doubt that the peculiarities of interaction with the group of students largely stem from the pedagogical philosophy and teaching style, so in this case the teacher has the opportunity to set the tone of such educational interaction.

In addition to the synchronous format, **asynchronous** format is also possible. In this case, educational objectives are solved at a convenient pace for students. They can ask questions in writing and later review the commented text, reading answers to their own comments and also comment on the questions or written remarks by other students or the instructor. Finally, a third, **combined** format is also possible, when the features of synchronous and asynchronous interaction are combined to achieve better educational results. It is no secret that foreign language teaching today strives for a balance between the unification of the educational process and individualization of the learning experience, which, in turn, has the potential to increase the effectiveness of such teaching. At the same time, individual characteristics of students and their cogni-

tive styles vary to a certain extent, which should also be taken into account [7]. Keeping in mind these important factors when designing learning tasks has potential beneficial effect on improving the quality of foreign language teaching and, at the same time, may contribute to improving students' individual learning experience.

An important aspect of collaborative work on a foreign-language text or document within the framework of project activity is the possibility of its realization outside of school hours [17, p. 170]. Moreover, very limited time of a foreign language class, as well as the limited number of such classes in the structure of the language course predetermine the desirability of group work on authentic text outside the classroom. Here it is necessary to overcome several limiting factors. Firstly, for objective reasons, students' extracurricular time cannot be strictly regulated, as it happens in the case of regular classes. This causes organizational difficulties. It can be difficult for students working as a group to coordinate and find a period of time when they can work together on the project. For this reason, the organization of group work on a foreign language text should provide for the possibility of its implementation in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Secondly, spatial limitations are also relevant here. If the physical space of the university campus and the rigid schedule of classes become unifying factors of educational process, then the out-of-class time is often associated with students' spatial separation [18, p. 40-42]. This, in turn, predetermines the desirability of organizing such educational interaction in the digital environment, which has a compensatory potential in terms of leveling time and space limitations of students' coordinative interactions.

Finally, an obstacle to effective group work in this case may be the technical heterogeneity of devices used by students. Many of the students have only a smartphone at their disposal and do not have the ability to use a personal computer or laptop outside of the learning space. This factor should also be taken into account when organizing and coordinating students' extracurricular learning interactions in their work on foreign language text materials as an element of project work. Nevertheless, the very possibility to use smartphones in principle allows organizing such learning activities in the digital space with the help of unified software (specially designed for abstracting and analyzing texts and documents or non-specialized digital services that imply such a possibility).

When organizing extracurricular activities in this case, the importance of the coordinating role of the teacher should not be overlooked [17, p. 175]. The teacher selects a relevant digital platform that: a) is suitable for working with a variety of digital devices that students may own (smartphones, tablets, laptops, personal computers); b) allows synchronous and asynchronous interactions; c) provides for the possibility of coordinating, moderating and controlling the teacher's participation in the process of working on the text; d) allows to save the results of this work (for example, in the form of comments, questions and clarifying remarks from students and the teacher) and visually demonstrate the degree of participation of each student in the group. Once again, here one should not forget about the possibility (and in some cases the necessity) of distributing roles among the group participants [4, p. 39]. Clearly formulated tasks and evaluation criteria, a properly selected digital platform, the possibility of using a variety of personal digital devices, monitoring of work

progress and visualization of specific results are the key to successful and productive group work on authentic texts and documents as an important element of educational project activity.

If the work on abstracting and analyzing authentic foreign-language texts typically takes place at the initial or intermediate stages of work on the educational project, then the presentation of its results in the form of a presentation, on the contrary, in most cases occurs at its final stage [1, p. 69; 19, p. 94]. Multimedia presentation is traditionally widely used in the context of a foreign language class, because, among other things, it successfully combines the student-centered nature of work, research and exploring component, visibility and accessibility, as well as brevity and potential for subsequent discussion. For such work, the classroom should be equipped with a digital projector and screen or a large enough digital display connected to a computer. However, it is not always possible to use presentations in foreign-language classes due to the specific features of the classroom. Often the main obstacle here is the technical side of the issue – many teaching spaces are not equipped or for objective reasons may not be equipped with the technical means necessary to deliver presentations. In such a situation, instructors are often forced to give up full-fledged work with presentations in the classroom and resort to less promising alternatives, such as:

- 1) uploading the presentation file to an educational platform without actually presenting it in the classroom;

- 2) recording the presentation on video and making the video available to students in the study group;

- 3) presenting presentations in a fully remote synchronous format.

The lower efficiency of organizing such work with presentations is due to the limitations of the way they are delivered. In the first case, there is de facto no oral component of the presentation, and this applies both to the students presenting their presentation and to the other students, whose participation is traditionally implied in the final phase of the presentation, reserved for discussion questions and general discussion. In the second case, the negative aspects include the significantly reduced possibility of interaction between students (students only react to the recorded and published video of the presentation in the comments section or by recording their own video with an oral response), as well as the focus of this format on extracurricular remote work. Finally, in the third case, the problematic aspects are related to the format of a remote interaction, which often negatively affects students' motivation to participate in the discussion.

The solution to the problem of difficulties related to delivering educational presentations in the classroom that are due to the insufficient number of necessary technical means, may be found in the use of students' personal digital devices. The key aspect here is the use of software that allows organizing electronic conferences (the most common example is Zoom). By creating or scheduling such an online conference, the instructor sends students a link that they can use to connect. Students use personal digital devices (phones, tablets or laptops) to connect to the conference during the classroom session. This creates a parallel digital learning environment in which students can deliver their presentations. On the one hand, the slides are shown in the digital space of the online conference – students and instructor have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the slides on the screens of their own digital devices. On the other hand, the oral

part of the presentation is delivered in the traditional form, because in the conditions of simultaneous presence of students and instructor in the classroom, employing digital channels of sound and video transmission is not necessary. Thus, here we are dealing with the organization of a hybrid educational space that combines the presence of students in the classroom and their involvement in communication in the target language concurring with the demonstration of the accompanying visual material in the digital space, that is accessed via personal digital devices connected to the same online conference. In this case we are dealing with the **remedial** format of using students' personal digital devices that allow to organize work with educational presentations. This format implies the compensatory nature of access to such digital devices, as it levels out the limiting factor of limited technical equipment of the classroom.

In addition to the remedial format, a **complementary** format is also possible. Here personal digital devices are used not as a means of overcoming technical limitations in the educational space, but as a supplement to the technical equipment available in the classroom, necessary for working with educational presentations. In this case, personal digital devices allow for individualizing the students' experience in interacting with the slides being presented. Here, the actual presentation is presented on a screen or large display in the classroom, but students are also able to follow the slides on their own devices. Overall, it should be noted that there are several advantages of using personal digital devices to work with instructional presentations in remedial or complementary formats. In addition to the aforementioned individualization and familiarity of the experience of interacting with one's own device [8; 18], participation of

students not currently presenting becomes more interactive. Instead of just passively listening, they have the opportunity to use their own digital devices to ask relevant questions in the conference chat or to comment on the presentation without disrupting the presentation. In other words, here there is an opportunity for more active participation of all present learners at every stage of the presentation. In addition, the hybrid nature of a class organized in this way, where traditional classroom interaction is complemented by a digital space, allows, if necessary, for students or invited guests who cannot be present in the physical space of the classroom to participate in the discussion. Finally, in conditions of technical abundance in the classroom, there may be technical problems or problems with the classroom computer used for work with the projector and presentations. In this case, creating an online conference that allows students to join with their personal digital devices can act as a kind of “backup plan” to

avoid disruption of the class due to technical problems.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, it should be noted that although traditionally students’ access to their own digital devices in a foreign language class is considered to be an undesirable factor that distracts from the educational process [20, p. 318], there are scenarios for productive use of such devices. Such scenarios apply to both in-class and out-of-class learning activities, which, in the case of project work, turn out to be an integral element of interactions within the group. Here, personal digital devices help to offset technical limitations, which manifests the compensatory nature of their use. In addition, digital devices facilitate coordination between the participants of the group project work, which demonstrates the coordinating potential of the use of personal devices in learning activities in the context of a foreign language university course.

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