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Teaching students to communicate in a foreign language through artificial intelligence technologies

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Abstract

Importance. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools have significant linguistic and didactic potential, allowing them to be integrated into a foreign language teaching process in order to form aspects of a foreign language and develop types of foreign language speech activity. However, despite the availability of step-by-step methods of teaching a foreign language based on AI, most of them are focused on the lexical and grammatical speech skills formation and the written monologue skills development of learners and students. The methodology development for teaching foreign language communication to English-major students through practice with an AI tool is not the subject of a separate study. The goal of the study is to develop a methodology for teaching foreign language communication to English-major students through practice with an AI tool and to test its effectiveness during experimental training.

Materials and Methods. The participants of the training are 2nd year students of the training direction "Linguistics" ("Theory and Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages and Cultures") (LGPU) and "Translation and Translation Studies" (LGTU) specialty. In the CG (N = 24), the training took place according to the traditional method of teaching students without practice with the instrument AI. In the EG (N = 24), along with classroom classes, students participated in educational communication in a foreign language with virtual interlocutors on the application Character.AI. The aspects of control are 16 skills (perception, production and interaction) of speech communication. The Student's t-test is used for statistical data processing.

Results and Discussion. The conducted experimental study has generally proved the author's methodology effectiveness for teaching foreign language communication to English-major students through artificial intelligence technologies: express their point of view on the issue under discussion (t = 1.44 at p = 0.08), argue agreement or disagreement on the issue under discussion (t = 1.44 at p = 0.08) and follow the communication order. The data obtained show that the students' practice with a virtual interlocutor did not have much impact on the first two skills development. Relatively high indicators of the ascertaining cross-section in these aspects of control (skill 2, 3: CG: $\bar{x}$ = 4.25; EG: $\bar{x}$ = 4.29; skill 2.4: CG: $\bar{x}$ = 4.00; CG: $\bar{x}$ = 4.04) indicate that these skills are developed by the majority of students in the 1st year of higher education or in high school secondary schools.

Conclusion. The novelty of the conducted research lies in the author's methodology development for teaching foreign-language speech communication to English-major students through practice

with an AI tool (Character.AI). The proposed methodology can be used in secondary schools and linguistic and non-linguistic universities.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, speech communication, written communication, Character.AI

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Обучение студентов иноязычному общению посредством технологий искусственного интеллекта

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Аннотация

Актуальность. Инструменты искусственного интеллекта (ИИ) обладают значительным лингводидактическим потенциалом, позволяющим их интегрировать в процесс обучения иностранному языку с целью формирования аспектов иностранного языка и развития видов иноязычной речевой деятельности. Однако, несмотря на наличие поэтапных методик обучения иностранному языку на основе ИИ, большая их часть ориентирована на формирование лексико-грамматических навыков речи и развитие умений письменной монологической речи учащихся и студентов. Разработка методики обучения студентов языкового вуза иноязычному речевому общению посредством практики с инструментом ИИ не выступала предметом отдельного исследования. Цель исследования – разработка методики обучения студентов языкового вуза иноязычному общению посредством практики с инструментом ИИ и проверка ее эффективности в ходе экспериментального обучения.

Материалы и методы. Участниками обучения выступили студенты 2 курсов направления подготовки «Лингвистика» («Теория и методика преподавания иностранных языков и культур») (ЛГПУ) и специальности «Перевод и переводоведение» (ЛГТУ). В контрольной группе (КГ) (N = 24) обучение проходило по традиционной методике обучения без практики студентов с инструментом ИИ. В экспериментальной группе (ЭГ) (N = 24) наряду с ауди-

торными занятиями студенты принимали участие в учебном общении на иностранном языке с виртуальными собеседниками на платформе Character.AI. Аспектами контроля выступили 16 умений (восприятия, продукции и взаимодействия) речевого общения. Для статистической обработки данных использовался *t*-критерий Стьюдента.

Результаты исследования. Проведенное экспериментальное исследование в целом доказало эффективность авторской методики обучения студентов языкового вуза иноязычному общению посредством технологий искусственного интеллекта: выражать свою точку зрения по обсуждаемому вопросу (t = 1,44 при p = 0,08), аргументировать согласие или несогласие по обсуждаемому вопросу (t = 1,44 при p = 0,08) и следовать очередности в общении. Полученные данные показывают, что практика студентов с виртуальным собеседником не оказала особого влияния на развитие первых двух умений. Относительно высокие показатели констатирующего среза по данным аспектам контроля (умение 2,3: КГ: $\bar{x}$ = 4,25; ЭГ: $\bar{x}$ = = 4,29; умение 2.4: КГ: $\bar{x}$ = 4,00; ЭГ: $\bar{x}$ = 4,04) свидетельствуют о том, что данные умения были развиты у большинства студентов на 1 курсе вуза или в старших классах общеобразовательной школы.

Выводы. Новизна проведенного исследования заключена в разработке авторской методики обучения студентов языкового вуза иноязычному речевому общению посредством практики с инструментом ИИ (Character.AI). Предлагаемая методика может быть использована в средней общеобразовательной школе и языковых и неязыковых вузах.

Ключевые слова: искусственный интеллект, речевое общение, письменная коммуникация, Character.AI

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INTRODUCTION

The updated version of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)[1] presented a new vision of detailed goals for teaching a foreign language. If the original version (CEFR, 2000) defined the development of speech activities (speaking, reading, listening and writing) as one of the main learning outcomes, then the updated version combines listening and reading into “perception”, and speaking and writing into “production”. In addition, two more components are added to them: interaction and mediation. It should be noted that interaction and mediation were partially introduced in the requirements for foreign language proficiency earlier, but they complemented and integrated the traditional four types of speech activity. The mimicry ability to express interest in communication was represented in speaking skills. The similarity of cognitive processes, but implemented through different channels (listening and reading or speaking and writing), led to the grouping of types of speech activity by type of cognitive activity: reception and production. The separation of two new groups of skills – mediation and interaction – into sep-

[1] Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 273 p.

arate blocks of skills shows the relevance of their development for mastering a foreign language as a means of communication. The ability to interact with the interlocutor and act as an intermediary between native speakers of different languages and cultures is very relevant for cross-cultural foreign language communication in modern multicultural and multilingual communities [1; 2]. However, despite the urgency of students mastering the skills of interaction and mediation, the time constraints of classroom classes do not allow them to fully pay the necessary attention to develop these skills. This circumstance forces teachers to use additional forms of education to involve students in speech-thinking activities in a foreign language. Mixed form of education that has become widespread in the context of the coronavirus pandemic COVID-19 infection, allows you to use a project method that includes classroom and extracurricular language practice of students.

The rapid spread and development of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in many industries and spheres of human life, including education, has made it possible to integrate AI tools, such as web applications and neural networks, into the process of teaching a foreign language. Over the period from 2022 to the present, Russian and foreign scholars have conducted a lot of research that examined the didactic and methodological functions of AI tools. A significant body of research is devoted to the use of web platforms and web applications that operate on the basis of AI in teaching students and students to write. In particular, J. Park [3], I. Perdana and M. Farida [4], J.M. Dembsey [5], M.A. Ghufron and F. Rosyida [6], K. Jayavalan and A.B. Razali [7], M.R. Manap, N.F. Ramli and A.A.M. Kassim [8], J. Wang and M. Brown [10], and M. Zhang [11] have reviewed various aspects of teaching essay writing in a foreign language using evaluative feedback from the Grammarly platform. Manap, N.F. Ramli, A.A.M. Kassim [9], J. Wang and M.S. Brown [9] and M. Zhang [10] described methods of teaching students to write essays in English through interaction with the PaperRater web platform PaperRater. K. Guo and D. Wang [11], A. Mizumoto and M. Eguchi [12], P.V. Sysoyev and E.M. Filatov [13] and P.V. Sysoyev, E.M. Filatov, N.I. Khmarenko and S.S. Murunov [14] presented different methods of teaching writing creative works in a foreign language when working with the ChatGPT neural network A.A. Pribytkova, T.Yu. Tormyshova and O.N. Khaustov [15] and T.Yu. Tormyshova, T.Yu. Ryazantseva and N.I. Sukhanova [16]. They described the results of experimental work on the implementation of the web application Criterion in teaching English-major students to write essays in a foreign language. In these and some other studies, scholars argue that students work with AI tools should be conducted during extracurricular hours. Classroom sessions should be used for students academic work with the teacher. Such practice should fit into the general method of teaching written speech, which includes both classroom explanation by the teacher and the development of language material by students, as well as extracurricular work of students with AI tools.

Significantly much less works are devoted to teaching students oral or written communication by means of AI technologies. D.O. Sorokin in his study reveals the language didactic potential of voice assistants and chatbots in the development of speaking skills of English-major students [17]; P.V. Sysoyev and E.M. Filatov [18] describe the language didactic potential of the chatbot Replika in the development of

students' written interaction skills, E.M. Filatov [19] and D.O. Sorokin [20] present the methodological possibilities of the web application Character.AI in the development of students' and learners' communication skills.

Despite the available publications devoted to the use of AI tools in teaching learners and students oral and written speech, most of them are focused on learners who speak a foreign language at the A2-B1 level. Few studies are devoted to the study of the potential of AI in teaching foreign language communication to language university students who speak a foreign language at the B2-C1 level.

The goal of the study is to develop a method for teaching English-major students to communicate in a foreign language using artificial intelligence tools.

Research objectives:

– to determine the list of speech skills developed by English-major students in productive activity (levels B2-C1);

– to develop a step-by-step method of teaching students to communicate in a foreign language through the web-application Character.AI;

– to test the effectiveness of the author's teaching method during the experiment.

Literature review. Among several modern web applications based on AI technologies, created for people to communicate with a virtual interlocutor, the most popular among foreign language teachers is the Character.AI application, created on the basis of the English language model (ELM) LaMDA. Its didactic properties and methodological functions are described in detail in the works of E.M. Filatov [19] and D.O. Sorokin [20]. Scholars note that in this web application users can either communicate with an already existing character (a famous artist, politician or artistic hero) or create their own character. Users can create a history of their character by adding history (date and place of birth, details of the character's life activities, etc.) to the corresponding section of the application. Thus, when communicating, the virtual interlocutor will use the facts of his biography in his answers. In other cases, when communicating, the application will generate answers to questions on its own.

Based on the Character.AI web application, it is possible to develop a whole list of foreign language speech interaction skills presented in the CEFR[2], as well as in the works of E.M. Filatov [19] and D.O. Sorokin [20]. The present study will focus on the development of the skills presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that mediation skills were not included in the list of skills that students develop when working with a web-application Character.AI. This is because the development of mediation skills requires at least three participants in communication, if one of them is an AI tool. In the context of individual student work with the Character.AI this is not possible.

In the methodological literature, the authors distinguish different stages of teaching a foreign language through practice with AI tools. At the same time, as P.V. Sysoyev and E.M. Filatov rightly point out [14; 18], the practice of students with AI should be carried out in extracurricular time and integrated into the traditional method of teaching a foreign language.

In this study, we propose a step-by-step method for developing foreign language communication skills of students of a language university, consisting of six consecutive stages.

[2] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages…

At the first stage, students study the topic of a class or section of a textbook in the traditional face-to-face format, perform appropriate exercises and tasks for the formation of language skills and the development of speech communication skills.

At the second stage, the teacher explains the purpose and value of communicating in a foreign language with a web application Character.AI, indicates the topic of communication, speech interaction skills developed by students in the process of communicating with the AI tool, work deadlines and the result of practice with the AI tool, which will become material for further work in the classroom. The teacher determines whether students create a virtual interlocutor on the Character.AI independently, or they interact with existing characters. As P.V. Sysoyev correctly notes [21], the subject of interaction of students with a virtual interlocutor should correspond to the subject-thematic content of teaching the language of students.

At the third stage, students register on the platform Character.AI. When creating your virtual hero, upload all the necessary information about your hero.

At the fourth stage, students participate in communication in a foreign language with a virtual interlocutor on the platform Character.AI. In the course of communication, students must solve the communicative tasks that the teacher sets for them at the second stage of training. Proof of communication with a virtual interlocutor should be a printout of the transcript of the conversation, illustrating the student's solution of the set communication tasks.

In the fifth stage, students work in small groups or pairs in the classroom. Each of them explains how they solved communication

Table 1

List of foreign language speech interaction skills of students of a language university

Type of foreign language speech interaction	Skills
1. Perception	1.1. understand the main topic of communication; 1.2. understand the content of answers to specific questions; 1.3. understand the full content of the conversation; 1.4. make temporal and cause-and-effect connections between events and phenomena 1.5. understand the interlocutor's position on the issue under discussion
2. Production	2.1. initiate and maintain communication; 2.2. make requests for information; 2.3. express his/her point of view on the issue under discussion; 2.4. argue agreement or disagreement on the issue under discussion; 2.5. answer the interlocutor's questions
3. Interaction	3.1. show and show interest in the subject of discussion; 3.2. follow the order of communication; 3.3. use language tools that correspond to the communication situation; 3.4. answer questions in the correct form; 3.5. ask and reformulate requests/questions in order to get the necessary information; 3.6. get out of situations of communication failures in the future. in the correct form

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of CEFR, [20; 21].

problems when communicating with a virtual interlocutor in the app Character.AI find out what communication failures there were, and how he got out of them. All this is illustrated with examples on the printed transcript of the conversation. At this stage, students can also reflect on their educational and cognitive activities while working with the AI tool. The teacher monitors students' work in small groups.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The author's step-by-step method of teaching students of a language university to communicate in a foreign language through practice with a virtual interlocutor on the Character.AI was tested in experimental training, which took place in the Lipetsk State Pedagogical P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky University and Lipetsk State Technical University in the first semester of the 2024/2025th academic year. The participants of the training were 2nd-year students of the 45.03.02 "Linguistics" ("Theory and method of teaching foreign Languages and Cultures") (LSPU) and specialty 45.05.01 "Translation and Translation Studies" (LSTU). Students were divided into control (CG) (N =24) and experimental (EG) (N = 24) groups equal in the number of students. In the CG, training was conducted according to the traditional method of teaching without students' practice with the AI tool. In the EG, along with classroom classes, students took part in educational communication in a foreign language with virtual interlocutors on the platform Character.AI.

The experimental study included three stages.

Establishing stage. Participants of the CG and EG had to take part in communication on the designated topic with the AI tool Character.AI for solving communication problems. The assessment criteria were the skills of foreign language speech communication, presented in Table 1.

Formative stage. Participants of the CG and EG were trained in foreign language speech communication in English classes. Invariable variables include: subject-thematic and linguistic content of teaching a foreign language, teaching materials, methods of teaching foreign language speech communication, the amount of classroom workload (8 hours per week). The variable to be changed is the method of teaching foreign language speech communication to students based on practice with a web application Character.AI. CG students did not participate in interaction with AI tools, and EC students participated in working with Character.AI during extracurricular activities once a week.

Control stage. Students of the CG and EG completed the same task of participating in communication on the designated topic with the AI tool Character.AI for the purpose of solving communicative tasks, as in the ascertaining stage.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In order to reveal the effectiveness of the author's method of teaching foreign language communication to language students by means of artificial intelligence technologies, the data of the slices at the formative and control stages in two groups were subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS Statistics software (Student's t-criterion). The results of the study are summarized in Tables 2–4.

Results and discussion. Analysis of the materials in Tables 2–4 allows us to identify several issues for scientific discussion.

Firstly, the conducted experimental research proved the effectiveness of the author's

Table 2

Data of the cut-off at the initial stage in CG and EG

Mindfulness	CG average ($\bar{x}$)	EG average ($\bar{x}$)	*t*-criterion	*p*-value
1.1.4	4.41	4.33	1.44	0,08*
1.2.	4.33	4.29	0.56	0,28*
1.3.	4.29	4.25	0.56	0,28*
1.4.	4.16	4.20	0.56	0,28*
1.5.	4.41	4.45	1	0,16*
2.1.	4.20	4.29	1.44	0,08*
2.2.	4.12	4.16	0.56	0,28*
2.3.	4.25	4.29	1	0,16*
2.4.	4.00	4.04	1	0,16*
2.5.	4.29	4.33	0.56	0,28*
3.1.	4.08	4.16	1.44	0,08*
3.2.	4.91	4.95	1	0,16*
3.3.	4.41	4.37	1	0,16*
3.4.	4.79	4.83	1	0,16*
3.5.	4.50	4.54	1	0,16*
3.6.	3.62	3.70	1.44	0,08*

Note: * – $p > 0.05$.

Source: calculated and compiled by the authors.

Table 3

Comparison of cross-sectional data at the ascertaining and control levels stages in CG and EG

Skills	CG		EG	
	t-criterion	*p*-value	*t*-criterion	*p*-value
1.1.2	2.76	0.005**	4.89	0.0001**
1.2.3	3.39	0.001**	4.89	0.0001**
1.3.3	3.71	0.0001**	4.73	0.0001**
1.4.4	4.41	0.0001**	5.31	0.0001**
1.5.3	3.07	0.002**	3.41	0.001**
2.1.3	3.07	0.002**	3.71	0.0001**
2.2.3	3.39	0.001**	4.05	0.0002**
2.3.3	3.39	0.001**	3.71	0.0001**
2.4.4	4.41	0.0001**	4.15	0.0001**
2.5.3	3.71	0.0001**	4.41	0.0001**
3.1.3	3.07	0.002**	4.79	0,0001**
3.2.1	1	0.16*	–	–
3.3.1	1.36	0.09*	3.07	0.002**
3.4.1	1.44	0.08*	1.81	0.04**
3.5.2	2.26	0.01**	3.39	0.001**
3.6.1	1.44	0.08*	6.78	0.0001**

Note: ** – $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: calculated and compiled by the author.

Table 4

Cross-section data at the control stage in CG and EG

Skill	CG average ($\bar{x}$)	EG average ($\bar{x}$)	*t*-criterion	*p*-value
1.1.4	4.66	4.91	2.76	0.005**
1.2.4	4.66	4.87	2.46	0.01**
1.3.4	4.66	4.87	2.46	0.01**
1.4.4	4.62	4.83	2.46	0.01**
1.5.4	4.70	4.91	2.46	0.01**
2.1.4	4.50	4.66	2.14	0.02**
2.2.4	4.45	4.58	1.81	0.04**
2.3.4	4.58	4.66	1.44	0.08*
2.4.4	4.45	4.54	1.44	0.08*
2.5.4	4.66	4.79	1.81	0.04**
3.1.4	4.37	4.66	3.07	0.002**
3.2.4	4.95	4.95	–	–
3.3.4	4.54	4.66	1.81	0.04**
3.4.4	4.87	4.95	1.44	0.08*
3.5.4	4.70	4.85	2.14	0.02**
3.6.3	3.70	4.37	6.78	0.0001**

Note: * – $p > 0.05$; ** – $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: calculated and compiled by the author.

method of teaching foreign language communication to language students by means of artificial intelligence technologies. The comparison of the results of the controlling cut-off in CG and EG shows the absence of statistical significance in the differences between the groups. For all aspects of control $p > 0.05$.

Comparison of the results of the control and test cutoffs in CG and EG indicates that in both groups the training can be considered effective. For the majority of control aspects $p \leq 0.05$. The exception was the ability to follow the order in communication (CG: $t = 1$ at $p = 0.16$; EG: – absolute absence of differences in the indicators of the two slices). At the same time, the survey at the establishing stage recorded rather high indicators for this aspect of control (CG: $\bar{x} = 4.91$; EG: $\bar{x} = 4.95$). This means that before participating in the experiment the students mastered this skill of speech communication at a high level.

Comparison of the results of the control cut-off in CG and EG testifies in favor of the effectiveness of the author's method. For most aspects of control $p \leq 0.05$. The exceptions were three skills: to express one's point of view on the discussed issue ($t = 1.44$ with $p = 0.08$), to argue agreement or disagreement on the discussed issue ($t = 1.44$ with $p = 0.08$) and to follow the order in communication. The obtained data show that students' practice with a virtual interlocutor did not have a special impact on the development of the first two skills. Relatively high values of the establishing cutoff for these aspects of control (skill 2.3: CG: $\bar{x} = 4.25$; EG: $\bar{x} = 4.29$; skill 2.4: CG: $\bar{x} = 4.00$; EG: $\bar{x} = 4.04$) indicate that these skills were developed in the majority of students in the

1st year of university or in high school of general education.

Secondly, the analysis of the data of the average scores of the results of the control and control sections in the CG and EG shows that in general the students' receptive skills are slightly better developed than the productive ones.

Thirdly, it should be noted that mediation skills in general did not cause problems for the students of CG and EG (Table 2). This is due to the fact that traditionally most of these skills are integrated into the widespread skills of speech activity. During several years in the process of speech skills development, students were taught to follow the order in communication, to choose the necessary language means in accordance with the communication situation, to answer questions in a correct form, etc. The greatest difficulties of students caused the ability to get out of situations of communicative failures in the correct form (Concluding cutoff: CG: $\bar{x}$ = = 3.62; EG: $\bar{x}$ = 3.70). This can be explained with the fact that most of the students' habitual communicative failures that occur in everyday life are solved habitually through short clarifications and non-verbal behavior. The main difficulty for students at the initial stage of the study was caused by communicative failures when the virtual interlocutor switched to another topic of conversation and interpreted students' questions in their own way during the conversation. Obviously, this is a new skill that needs to be purposefully developed. In the course of learning through extracurricular practice with AI, EG students were able to develop this skill (EG: $\bar{x}$ = 4,37).

CONCLUSION

As a result of the conducted experimental study, the effectiveness of the author's method for teaching foreign language communication to students of a language university through artificial intelligence technologies was proved. The EG participants were able to master the necessary foreign language communication skills at a higher level than the CG students in most of the skills controlled during the experiment. The exception was the ability to express one's point of view on the issue under discussion, argue for agreement or disagreement on the issue under discussion, and follow the order of communication. Such results are explained by the fact that by the time of training, students already possessed these skills of foreign language communication at a high level.

The perspective of the research is to study the methodological potential of other AI tools in the development of foreign language communication skills and the development of new methods of teaching a foreign language through students' practice with AI tools.

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