INTERACTIVE TEACHING IN DISTANCE LEARNING

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Interactive methods of teaching foreign languages have long been regarded in home methodology among the most effective techniques in enhancing students' communicative competence in using the foreign language. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has become a significant challenge for many educators, making them change approaches to planning classes, their organisation and conduct and how they employ interactive techniques in distance education.

A number of modern online platforms and various educational technology (EdTech) tools are aimed at enabling teachers to organise the teaching process online in such a way that it is effective and engaging for learners, allowing collaboration between the learners and their interaction with the teacher. However, many educators earlier questioned the significance of new technologies in their contribution to learning, facilitation of the learning process and formation of students' sound knowledge of the foreign language. Among the issues that caused educators' concerns were those connected with the availability of gadgets both for teachers and learners, the quality and reliability of the internet connection, class timing, appropriateness of the EdTech use, etc. But the pandemic crucially changed the attitude to EdTech, making it the only possible way to conduct classes during the lockdowns. Ismailov and Laurier stated, "most recent studies suggest that the experience of social distancing and remote learning might have lasting implications on future university program designs, and the real value of learning will be in the quality of interaction, practical collaborative work, and engagement in online and in-person learning" [1].

Thus, educational technology or information communication technology (ICT) which were created to assist and facilitate the learning process, became the main tools for teaching during remote education. As a university teacher, I have tried out several EdTech products teaching students with the aim not only to convey the necessary knowledge but to make classes more interactive. The choice of EdTech tools was stipulated by the necessity to acknowledge students with the course material, monitor how they comprehend and process the information, and make sure they will be able to use it further. The development of skills essential for proper language acquisition, i.e. speaking, reading, writing, and listening, also influenced the selection of EdTech, in addition to learners' ability to work on their own, in groups or in teams. The most frequently used in my teaching practice EdTech products are Google classroom, shared Google Docs files, Google Slides, Jamboard and the breakout rooms in a videoconference. All of them proved to be engaging, simple to get access to, easy to use, and quite effective in organising teacher-student and student-student interactions as well as students' collaboration on the fulfilment of the set task. Ron Nash describes an interactive classroom as one that "is filled with the learning partners, including the teacher" [2] with the shift from teacher-centred teaching to learner-centred approach.

Collaboration can be regarded as an action or interpersonal relationship between professionals to achieve a specific purpose [3]. Students' collaboration on the given task makes interactive learning even more productive, developing students' soft skills, which graduates from the program will need to work in a professional environment.

Modern linguodidactics and pedagogy offer various interactive methods to teaching foreign languages, including warming-up activities, role plays, brainstorming, discussion of current issues, presentation, projects, etc. These student-centred methods are interactive, appropriate for involving students more actively in acquiring knowledge, skills and will definitely enhance learning outcomes. However, without careful planning and organisation, these activities may be time-consuming and disrupt the pace of the lesson.

The employment of any interactive technique requires thorough preparation in distance learning. The teacher must be able to properly identify the amount of the material to cover and think about how to deliver it most productively in e-learning, utilising different types of interactions. Class timing, being a part of thorough planning of the interactive activity, is a pivot of successful teaching. Judging from personal experience, although skilful social media users, some learners may at first struggle to perform a simple online interactive task, e.g. add some ideas to shared Google Docs files or Jamboard. Therefore, careful planning, timing and choice of the appropriate EdTech for interactive teaching are extremely important for distance learning.

As an example of such interactive activity, I can provide an outline of the class where students discussed social problems in our society. First, learners were informed about the topic of the class and were invited to think about social problems commonly found in our society. Afterwards, students were assigned to three breakout rooms where in small-sized groups they brainstormed ideas on social issues. Their next assignment was to decide on the most acute and, using Jamboard, present their group's argumentation, explain why they have chosen that particular problem, and think about taking turns while presenting. After the closure of breakout rooms, each group presented the social issue they decided to talk about to the whole class. Students were taking turns, invited listeners to ask questions and answered them. At the end of the class, the students were asked to write brief critical reflection feedback on the class and submit it via Google classroom. This lesson involved a lot of students' interaction and collaboration, with the main focus on developing their speaking and writing skills.

Another popular interactive activity with my students, which is also easy to do in distance learning, is "silent discussion", utilising a whiteboard or just a shared Google Docs file. The teacher provides a topic for discussion, and students, instead of speaking, put down their ideas in writing, using words, phrases or short clauses, which others can dispute in writing as well. Some discussions were so intense that students found it difficult to stop.

Other interactive activities widely used in my classes during distance learning are peer-reviewing, word cloud guessing, word of the day, small-scale research on students' interest with a Powerpoint presentation in class, photo homework, etc.

Interactivity in the process of distance learning fills students with enthusiasm develops their creativity, critical thinking, and initiative. From the array of EdTech

tools, the teacher chooses those that contribute best to achieving learning objectives, facilitate learning, and make it efficient and learner-centred.

References

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