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Internet Technology-Based Projects in Learning and Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Yakutsk State University

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Abstract

This paper discusses recent uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in fostering Internet-based projects for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Yakutsk State University, Russia. It covers the authors' experiences integrating distance education and creating educational resources within the Moodle LMS and wiki projects based on Web 2.0 social networking technologies. Also it discusses our international project, Net-based Course Development: English through Digital Storyline, in cooperation with the University of Tromsø, Norway.

Keywords: E-learning; IT technologies; English as a Foreign Language; wiki; social networks

Possibilities provided by the Internet for educational purposes have been attracting more attention in recent studies devoted to the problems of using information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education. This tendency is fed by the development of Internet infrastructure and technologies, by their increasing availability and use, and by the ongoing search for new ways to improve educational quality through the use of technology.

E-learning in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) is developing at the same pace as in the rest of Russia. The Republic is considered to be well equipped with computer aids, but in order to manage a distant educational process and Internet interaction of all the participants of the educational process, it is crucial to provide an advanced and modernized ICT infrastructure on a qualitatively new level. The IT infrastructure is believed to play a leading role in managing distance learning and in increasing the effectiveness of the educational process and the overall educational system.

Many digital training materials have been created, but the developed materials are not widely and effectively used by teachers in the learning process. There are many reasons for this: no access to the Internet, slow Internet, and lack of compensation for creating media, and so on. However one of the main reasons is that ordinary teachers are not prepared to actively include e-learning in the curriculum. Some teachers do not have the necessary skills or an understanding of the advantages of e-learning, despite the fact that ICT training workshops for teachers on how to use and work on computers have been held for many years.

Teachers should remember the different modes of using computers in class. The first is administration: Computers can be used for creating timetables, planning courses, and so on. The second is testing: Computers can be used to ascertain the student's knowledge of the language, including everything the teacher has in mind. The third mode is as a classroom teaching aid, for example using a CD recording to start a lesson. In this mode, computer-introduced material leads to class discussion and activity to which the computer itself is not central. Thus the computer presents a piece of grammatical information, or a text that can be discussed by the students and the teacher, or a set of information for a logical problem or a role play. The fourth mode is direct teaching – using the computer for teaching some aspect of language (Brumfit, 1985).

One of our earliest experiences in distant education at the Faculty of Foreign Languages was a project on Expository Writing between Pembroke College, Oxford University and Yakutsk State University in 2002. The interactive course involved students in Yakutsk State University (YSU) and the students of its branch in Mirny. The students were expected to follow the course together from module to module as each module was available online for every participant according to the following course schedule: (1) a professor from Oxford created the modules and posted them online to the students in Yakutsk and Mirny; (2) within each module, the professor gave directions to the YSU instructors for the face-to-face classroom interactions with the students (in tandem with the online module); (3) The YSU instructors (in Yakutsk and Mirny) were to enhance the online lessons by engaging the students in face-to-face learning and discussion within each module. In addition, the students had different assignments to post material to each other to read online, particularly during the introductory assignments, which allowed them to have some online interaction with each other. They could also post messages online for others to view and send private messages by email. As the instructors in Yakutsk and Mirny were to enhance the online lessons by engaging the students in face-to-face learning and discussion within each module, the course was considered a distant education course with face-to-face enhancements.

In 2009, a team of four teachers from the English Philology Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages participated in a Yakutsk State University project to implement Internet-based educational resources. Our product was an electronic resource package for the *Practical Course of English*, one of the principal textbooks used by our students. The e-resource was situated within the Moodle learning management system. One of the features of this educational resource is that students can find additional information and materials that they will not be able to find in the textbook. As well, they can practice doing online tests, which prepares them for the progress tests for each unit of the textbook. The e-content includes writing tips, tips for evaluating,

commenting on, and analyzing texts, and excerpts from contemporary English and American writers' works. The obvious advantage of the e-resource is that it can be used by students in their out-of-class learning activities, which can be easily monitored by their teacher.

In February 2010, Yakutsk University also joined an international wiki project with students from the University of Tromsø, Norway including Academic Writing (www.academicwriting.wikidot.com) and English through Digital Storyline (www.yakutskcity.wikidot.com, <http://generation.wikidot.com/start>). This project, Net-based Course Development: English through Digital Storyline, was started with the Department of Teacher Education, University of Tromsø, Norway within the University of the Arctic Thematic Network, E-learning and Distant Education. The objectives of the project are as follows: 1) to learn to create the content of an Internet-based course using Web 2.0 technology (blogs, wikis, etc.) and a learning management system; 2) to introduce students to exploring and mastering digital tools, or "to develop their digital competence so that they themselves could discover the pedagogical potential in these tools;" 3) to find ways to incorporate contemporary Internet use and culture into foreign language teaching; 4) to study each others' experience of education through e-learning and Internet-based courses; (5) to establish contact between Russian and Norwegian colleagues for further cooperation, consultation, and exchange; and 6) to develop Internet-based cross-cultural communication networks between students of Arctic universities for a future teaching community.

Storyline is a method for cross-curricular teaching and learning centred on a specific theme. The main objective is to collaborate on a common storyline based on this methodology, entirely realised through so-called Web 2.0 tools (wikis and blogs) and applications (YouTube, Google tools, etc.) (Brox, 2009). A similar project had already been conducted at the University of Tromsø. Now it is intended to expand the storyline to include a wider range of learners.

In Yakutsk, the Storyline project will be integrated into the Practical Course of English for second-year EFL students. The project will be a component of the out-of-class activities of the students and will be evaluated by teachers at the end of the semester. Further plans will involve adapting the project to comply with credit-evaluated modules. In Tromsø, the project has already run through a one-year test period and is now ready to be integrated as a part of the English Didactics component in the one-year English course for third and fourth-year teacher trainees. Further integration is intended as a result of the present redesigning of the university's teacher education program.

The development of Web 2.0 technologies affected significantly the process of creating, circulating, and interpreting the sites' content (textual and graphic) in the Internet community. Depending on the content and address, social network services of the Internet might be divided into different groups: blogs, wikis, or micro-blogs (Syssoev & Evstigneev, 2009).

A new generation of students can be called a generation of Web 2.0 users. Most of them are active and advanced users of social networking sites (Vkontakte, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and are able not only to socialize, send and receive e-mails, and browse for information, but also to create

and maintain sites and blogs by filling them with photos, videos, and hyperlinks. Students can widely collaborate on group projects using wikis and in this way develop not only their digital competence, but also their language skills as well as their imaginative thinking.

In order to practise creating the content of an Internet-based course using Web 2.0 technology, a pilot project, VisitYakutsk.wikidot.com, was started in March, 2010, which involved 10 second-year EFL students. The activities on the project were divided into three periods.

1. In March after their teacher's short introduction about the content of the work and the final product anticipated, the students independently studied the possibilities that a wiki can provide in their project work. The students were set tasks to collect information and material for the project, which included finding and translating (if necessary) from Russian into English the background information about the history of Yakutsk and its current status and development, about the airport structure and tips for first-time visitors, about hotels, banks, restaurants, cafes, places for sightseeing, and museums in the town centre and on the outskirts, about shopping opportunities and souvenir kiosks, and about the University and its campus. Also, they took photographs of the objects they were going to describe in their project. At this stage the students created documents in MS Word.
2. In April the teachers helped to edit the material created by the students and to correct grammatical, lexical, spelling, and any other mistakes. After editing, the students began designing the wiki site.
3. In May, all the files were placed on the site with simultaneous designing of the material. Further development and maintenance of the site is done by the students at this stage. In order to incorporate the project into the academic course, the project will be a part of the Practical Course of English for second-year students as a component of out-of-class activities to be evaluated by teachers at the end of the semester.

In summary, ICT as tools of e-learning in teaching EFL are becoming more widespread in higher educational institutions and are meeting education quality requirements. E-learning in the academic curriculum allows educators to effectively combine the elements of self-study and distant education through software with the advantages of traditional classroom study and teaching. E-learning provides unlimited opportunities for collaboration in international and cross-cultural projects in learning EFL. In this regard, social network services should be actively used in the learning process as they are becoming increasingly popular among the younger generation.

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