

**UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' INDEPENDENT WORK
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
IN AN ERA OF DIGITAL SOCIETY**

**Marina E. Ryabova¹, Lyudmila A. Egorova²,
Irina V. Vashunina³**

^{1,2,3}Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Moscow, Russia

¹e-mail: ryabovame@mail.ru

ORCID id: 0000-0001-8728-3629

²e-mail: egorova-la@rudn.ru

ORCID id: 0000-0002-5159-1512

³e-mail: vashunina@yandex.ru

ORCID id: 0000-0002-3482-8215

Abstract. The priority role of modern information technologies in the field of teaching foreign languages with elements of distance learning based on the principles of individualized learning is considered. The relevance of the study is due to the acute demand for new approaches to the sources of self-development, characterized by a set of properties that allow continuous updating of knowledge. Students are becoming more aware of themselves as the subject of educational process. The concept of independent learning embraces various forms of material presentation, making e-learning not only mobile, but also adapted to the pace of everyday life. The student's involvement in the digital environment makes scientific research focus on the ability to work independently with a large amount of information, and, therefore, the subject of this study is independent work based on the principles of distance digital learning. The main objective is to summarize the methodology developed and tested by the authors in several Russian universities concerning the organization of students' independent work, which increases the regulation of self-

education in the field of foreign languages. The methodological basis of the study was the works by A. McAuley, B. Stewart, G. Siemens, D. Cormier and others, devoted to the development of technological components of self-study training, which is provided by open interfaces, modularity, cloud storage of training materials. It is revealed that with the absolutization of information technology, there is a risk of succumbing to the illusion of smart intelligence as a decisive one. The assumption that if a person has access to technologies, he actively uses them, is not valid. The study has shown that a fairly large number of students of different ages are consciously not using distance technologies, being fully aware of their functions. The results of the study also show constantly changing multidimensional vision, the dominance of visualization. The conclusion is made about the emerging digital culture as a continuously moving space of visual flows, in which electronic courses significantly expand the teacher's opportunities, giving free rein to students in the creative implementation of self-learning methods.

Keywords: independent work, self-education, creativity, self-study strategies

Introduction

Improving the quality of education in the context of digital society requires a competency-based model of education based on the educational strategy “from teaching to learning”. Russian higher education witnesses a shift in emphasis from the concept “to teach” to the term “to learn independently” using innovative technologies. Changes in the content and methods of the educational process led to mainstreaming independent work as the most demanded (Koryakovtseva N. F., 2018). The whole system of educational activity becomes focused on the individuality of the student, when the student independently consolidates the material covered, studies the source base of the programme, including foreign literature, as well as exercises self-control.

The author's point of view on the Students' Independent Work

(SIW) as the leading type of activity in teaching foreign languages does not mean that the SIW replaces other teaching aids, but on the contrary, the SIW is considered in close connection with many other teaching resources and methods. The theoretical basis of the study was the traditional method of teaching foreign languages (Mirolyubov A.A., 2002), context approach (Scrivener J., 2005; Willis D., 2003), total physical response (Asher J.J., 1982), communicative language teaching (Deng C., Carless D., 2009; Richards J. C., Rodgers T.S., 2001; Brown H. D., 2014) and many others. A general analysis of each of the methods suggests that the effectiveness of teaching foreign languages is closely related to the learner's personality, with their level of independence.

Purpose of the study

The research aims at a generalized analysis of the methodology for organizing students' independent work, developed and tested by the authors at university.

Methodology

On the one hand, the methodological basis of the study was the works by A. McAuley, B. Stewart, G. Siemens, D. Cormier and others, dedicated to the development of technological components of Smart Education, which is provided by open interfaces, modularity, cloud storage of educational materials, etc. (McAuley A., et al., 2010; Brückner C., 2011).

On the other, the methodological basis also includes the concepts of distance learning and students' independent work (Holmberg B., 1989). Key aspects of these theories touch upon the management of independent work, combining it with the interactive cooperation of the student and the teacher (Littlewood W., 2002; Dickinson L., 1987).

The problem of organizing SIW remains insufficiently developed and requires further study in the context of electronic (related to the Internet) education.

A key method of this study is interpretation analysis.

Results

The Concept of Independent Work

In the scientific literature, the concept of “independent work” (IW) is one of the most complex and interpreted in different ways.

IW may be defined generally and properly. IW in the broad sense of the word is an activity parallel to the classroom activity, deepening or supplementing it. This includes the entire system of educational activities, with the student participating as an active subject of the educational process: classroom work, extracurricular work, laboratory work, students' research work.

In the narrow sense, IW is the entire system of extracurricular students' training, including distance learning, aimed at various types of educational activities: classroom studies, laboratory practical classes, tests, exams, etc.

Russian methodologists tend to consider the SIW in the narrow sense (Zimnyaya I. A., 2012) as an activity supplementing the classroom work.

However, IW can be autonomous. The concept of students' autonomy in educational and cognitive activities in foreign languages acquisition was formed as part of a personality-oriented approach to education and was originally developed for teaching foreign languages for specific purposes (Benson P., 2000). Then this concept developed in a wider educational context, being applied at universities and comprehensive schools, and became the subject of research in terms of continuing education in the programmes of the European Council. H. Holec is believed to be the first to propose a definition of student autonomy in the field of foreign languages (Holec H., 2008). The goal of this training is providing each student with the conditions to maximize the development of their abilities, aptitudes, and satisfaction of their cognitive interests and needs.

The starting point in the organization of the SIW is the principle of multimodality. Multimodality is considered a social skill, which involves a multitude of technical multimedia channels, tools and language resources on the Internet linked into a single whole

(Ryabova M. E., 2008).

According to the goals, the SIW can be distinguished into: 1) educational; 2) training; 3) reinforcing; 4) repetitive; 5) developing; 6) creative; 7) controlling. Let's consider briefly each of them. The point of educational independent work is the students' independent performance of tasks during the explanation of the new material. The purpose of such work is to develop interest in the material being studied. Here, it is possible to immediately reveal the incomprehensible, complicated parts, knowledge gaps that make it difficult to digest the material. The SIW related to the formation of knowledge is carried out at the stage of introducing new material, the initial consolidation of knowledge, i.e. when knowledge is not yet solid. Independent educational work can include giving examples to the rules studied. Training independent work includes tasks for recognizing various properties. Training assignments often require reproducing or directly applying the rules already learned. They consist of similar assignments, containing the essential features and properties of the rule or phenomenon, e.g. multilevel tasks on flash cards, in accordance with the "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment" developed by the Council of Europe (A1, A2, B1, etc.).

Reinforcing independent work includes assignments, which contribute to the development of logical thinking and require the combined application of various rules. They show how well the material is learned. Based on the results of the assignments, the teacher decides whether it is still necessary to proceed with this topic (Richards J. C., Rodgers T.S., 2001).

Repetitive SIW assignments can bear either review or thematic character. Before introducing a new theme, the teacher should know if the students have the necessary background knowledge and identify the problems which can imply difficulties in learning the new material.

Developing SIW is actually homework connected with making reports on certain topics, preparing for academic competitions,

scientific conferences, etc.

Creative SIW suggests a high level of independence. Students learn to apply the acquired knowledge in new unexpected situations, e.g. projects, their implementation and presentation.

Controlling SIW is a prerequisite for achieving the planned learning outcome. The development of tests should be one of the main aids to control achieving learning objectives. Currently, controlling SIW is done primarily in test form. Various types of tests are to meet the following basic requirements: test components content aimed at testing basic learning skills should be of equal value, provide reliable verification of the level of knowledge, encourage students to demonstrate progress in their overall training.

Students' Independent Work at University

As far as the SIW in a cycle of classroom and extracurricular activities at university is concerned, its classification based on the degree of delay and the form of control seems the most successful. According to this criterion, the following forms of IW at university are distinguished:

SIW₁ - doing current assignments (both of a training nature and related to mastering new language material) of a teacher in a classroom. Their character is predetermined by the textbook, the tasks are the same for all students and are obligatory for them. The results are discussed together with the teacher during the lesson or checked out independently by students using the keys - the delay in monitoring is minimal.

SIW₂ - preparation for classes at home, in the media centre, Moodle, library. It is obligatory for all students – the control is delayed until the next lesson.

SIW₃ - individual work aimed at filling in individual gaps in the students' language proficiency. Special obligatory tasks are given only to those students (groups of students) who have missed classes or do not clearly understand the material. In this case, students work with additional materials in relation to the basic textbook. The reporting form is individual during special out-of-

hours consultations - the control is delayed until the next consultation.

SIW₄ – obligatory individual practice in a particular type of speech activity. The students receive only instructions from the teacher about the amount of material they should work on (read, listen to, etc.) within a given period of time (two weeks, a month). As for reading/listening material and execution time, the students are given the right to choose from the proposed list of literature / recordings; they are also allowed to make an independent choice of material not included in the specified list. To implement this form of IW students are provided with educational information system of training, or sound record rooms, specially equipped laboratories, media centres where they can find a large variety of material – the Internet sources, electronic texts, books and magazines – the control is quite delayed, may be formative and summative at the end of the semester.

SIW₅ - work on their own initiative (Master's level), not directly related to the educational material of a particular stage of study and not obligatory for students. The students are not required to report about it, although they can use the advice of a teacher in its implementation. We noted the growing tendency of students to improve their language level on their own initiative through various programmes (intensive courses of different levels, preparatory courses for exams at various levels, professionally oriented special courses, etc.). This also includes the Au-Pair programme, which is most popular among students, thanks to which language skills are integrated into the student's personality structure in the performance of their professional duties (e.g. governesses) together with the development, fulfillment of their cultural, value, leisure and other orientations. The point is that these programmes are not directly offered by universities, but are chosen by students independently at will, in accordance with the goals of self-education. These educational programmes open, undoubtedly, a broader range of opportunities in comparison with self-study based on the textbook.

In the practice of teaching foreign languages at a university, the SIW is rather understood as SIW₂ and SIW₃ aimed at preparing for and supplementing classroom training sessions. SIW₁ should in turn prepare for SIW₂ and SIW₃. The latter can become more productive if students are taught the methodology for their implementation not only indirectly through methodological instructions, memos, recommendations and a certain system of exercises (including exercises that form special intellectual skills), but also directly, taking the classroom time for this under the teacher's control.

At the initial stage of study at university, SIW₃, SIW₄ and SIW₅ are of particular importance. As for SIW₄ and SIW₅, they are especially relevant for those students who have received excellent grades and are eager to develop foreign language skills further.

The SIW is a multidimensional phenomenon, the basis of which is teaching aids, which are the source of activity, the subject basis of IW. This encourages the use of tasks aimed at working with various means. It is essential to search for the appropriate IW considering the specifics of the subject as well as the formation of students' ability to independently acquire knowledge from different sources. Thus, the various goals of teaching and learning a foreign language correspond to different types of SIW.

The Moodle and Students' Independent Work

In view of the foregoing, a methodology for structured organization of the SIW based on electronic courses was developed and tested at the Russian New University (Moscow) for three years (2016-2019). The platform for placing the electronic course was the virtual educational environment Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) - a web application that allows developing electronic courses for online learning with feedback. The choice of the Moodle platform is due to its popularity: it has been translated into dozens of languages, including Russian, and is used in more than 200 countries around the world. Moodle is based on the principles of social constructivism, focused on cooperation in learning. The specifics

of e-course on the Moodle platform are its modular structure, hypertext links to external sources, flexibility and wide control capabilities. The training course, designed for students studying German as a second foreign language, is divided into key module topics that present material in the format of presentations, lecture notes, assignments, tests, and links. The main resources used in the topics are Glossary, Assignment, Explanation, Forum, Chat, Lecture, Hyperlink and Test.

The tool Glossary contains keywords, vocabulary, where the student can enter words himself.

The tools “Task” and “Explanation” are used to formulate the purpose and conditions for completing tasks.

The resources “Forum” and “Chat” are necessary for discussing problem situations in study groups, which provides feedback dynamics.

The resource "Lecture" is a summary of the material demonstrating the basics to students.

The tool "Hyperlink" is used as additional material for reading and discussions.

The “Test” provides the opportunity to compile various types of tests, the advantage of which is the speed of processing, since most tests are evaluated automatically, and students can immediately see their results.

The variety of Moodle resources is not limited to the above-mentioned ones, we have noted just those most frequently used in the development of the electronic German language course. The modular system of the learning environment is flexible, which allows the teacher to customize the number of attempts of taking the final tests, post comments on individual components of the course.

Discussion

Testing the virtual course for three years helped to identify the positive and negative aspects of the technology for developing training courses on the Moodle platform. On the one hand, the creation of individualized foreign language courses can

significantly increase the effectiveness of training based on the controlled independent work of students. On the other hand, the effectiveness of virtual courses largely depends on the level of technical competence of all participants in the educational process and timely technical support. The main difficulty in the SIW based on Moodle is the virtual resource itself. The fact that students are not confident enough users greatly interferes with learning. The virtual learning management system should be developed to the integration of traditional and distance learning methods with the use of Smart Education. Firstly, electronic courses significantly increase opportunities for the teacher enhancing creativity. Secondly, the competent organization of the SIW on an interactive basis contributes to the quality of education. The prospect of using the Moodle platform is the development of individually oriented information, which will make the use of virtual courses more effective and targeted.

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