SELF ACCESS E-LEARNING LANGUAGE CENTRES AT TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES IN THE FOCUS OF MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: The article represents the results and perspectives of implementation of the Tempus FLERTUV (Foreign Language Education in Russian Technical Universities on the Volga) Project developed in 2005-2009 as a way of meeting the needs of Russian technical students for further learning foreign languages, maintaining their knowledge of English and German during the final 3 years of their university studies. Within the FLERTUV project, the prime objective was identified as to enable students to bridge the gap from formal learning to employment and, thus, develop the skills required by the global market and society. Three self-access language centres (SACs) in the largest cities of the Volga region – Saratov, Samara and Volgograd, one in each university, were established to provide supported self study opportunities in foreign languages for specific purposes (FLSP). The article is focused on the problems of the SAC management in view of methodological and socio-cultural aspects.

Keywords E-learning, Self-access centers, Languages for specific purposes, SAC management

I. BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

In the 21-st century economic and access barriers are coming down, students, professional and business people acquire greater opportunities to realize their ambitions in foreign countries. So they need to be equipped with all the necessary competences to fully participate in and benefit from modern society. The successful specialist requires a good command of at least two or three different languages. Nowadays a student must widen his outlook and learning strategies to operate in multicultural and multi-lingual world. The main purpose of the language teaching nowadays is the formation of the language personality, possessing such skills as the ability to transform information in native and foreign languages in different ways; the ability to behave appropriately in various professional communication situations, using appropriate communication styles and ethical standards. So the universities have to suggest new and different ways of learning for students\(^1\). The EU programme of actions in the field of education that has been elaborated in Bologna Declaration and supported by Russian Federation in 2003, had a tremendous impact on personal development of Russian students, academic staff and administrators, participated in joint projects.

The Tempus FLERTUV (Foreign Language Education in Russian Technical Universities on the Volga) Project was developed in 2004 as a way of meeting the needs of Russian technical students for further learning foreign languages, maintaining their knowledge of English and German during the final 3 years of their university studies. The idea of the whole project had been launched in Saratov

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State Technical University, when the English language teachers recognised the need to maintain and expand the students’ communicative competences in foreign languages through learners-centered approach. Education mission of learners-centered approach is life-long learning. Learners-centered approach can be called “a school of thinking” where a student is considered “a complicated system” and the word “a teacher” becomes a synonym to the words “a partner” and “a collaborator”. Learner-centered approach is characterized by the development of dialogue forms of teaching competences such as: transcendence - experience of studying "I"; tolerance-making experience of other cultures; authenticity - the experience of self-knowledge, ability to operate openly; sharing the experience in solving problems.

Three Russian State Technical Universities on the Volga decided to unite and in a joint effort contribute to the new challenges created by European integration and the emergence of a European higher education space. The main aim of the project has been to help bridge the gap between the first two years of a degree language programs (that are parts of Russian educational standards) and entry to employment three years later. In partnership with the University of Surrey (UK) and Oldenburg University (Germany) self-access centres (SACs) in three Russian universities on the Volga (Saratov, Samara and Volgograd) have been established. The purpose of the centers was declared as involving graduates in developing language skills through open access to learning and through tutorial support, based on learner-centered approach. A multimedia language centre with open access gives all students opportunity to attend language classes not only at regular times, but due to their particular work patterns and needs. Situation before the project in 3 technical universities despite some differences had a number of similarities concerning FLT for specific purposes:

- basically traditional teaching/learning methods that do not satisfy the requirements of Bologna Agreement; the lack of systematic anthropological knowledge – the emphasis was given on subject knowledge; the lack of rhetoric training for students and teachers;
- limited facilities for computer assisted foreign language training;
- teachers’ understanding of the need for bringing foreign language training in line with communicative approach;
- Willingness for change at all levels at the three technical universities, supported by university administration.

The participants tried to realize in the project the expected opportunities: improvement of the English language skills, professional language skills, communicative and pragmatic competences by teachers, students, all participants, professional growth, development of social and team work skills, universities’ image growth. Some important terms declared in the learner-centered approach were taken into consideration in the project development:

- Competence - the willingness of a learner to meet the challenges of professional and other activities on the basis of active use of internal and external resources;
- General (universal) competences - competences necessary for success in areas of professional and unprofessional activities;
- Professional (special) competence - the competence necessary to implement professional activity;
- Learning outcomes - a set of knowledge, skills and / or competences mastered by a learner, which he can demonstrate at the end of training. Learning outcomes indicate what the student should know, understand and do at the end of training
- Instrumental competences - a list of specific competences, for example: ability to work independently on a computer; ability to written and oral communication in the official language and foreign languages; willingness to work with information from various sources; socio-personal and general culture.

1.1 Setting up e-learning centre

Effective e-learning is the achieving of basic language skills, constructing new ideas through dialogues, a good cross-cultural and social communication. Saratov State Technical University started the programme promoting effective foreign language learning in technical university. Effective practices can really be effective with the right resources. Setting-up a self-access centre (SAC) - a space where students can work independently, at their own pace, with materials that are varied or tailor-made, according to their needs, preference and learning styles is the best solution for that
problem. The crucial point for SAC sustainability is a stock of self-access language learning materials. It is considered that these centres besides developing technical foreign language learning for students during their studies can help university staff and business people who wish to enhance their technical language skills or to develop communicative competences. Within an e-learning language centre students and professionals can attend and progress in their own time, at their own speed and achieve their linguistic objectives, acquiring autonomous learning skills. The Bologna process has convincingly shown that in order to effectively perform in the global economy and be successful in the global society one needs technical, interpersonal, and methodological skills. Technical skills include literacy, foreign languages, science, problem-solving, and analytical skills. Among interpersonal skills, communication and teamwork are very important. Methodological skills include abilities to learn autonomously, pursue lifelong learning, risk and change.

Settings up e-learning language centres at the universities depend on their needs and objectives. It is important that the university has a clear policy on languages acquisition with a commitment to self-access language learning. The task of management is to operate a SAC in a way which makes the best use of its resources in the pursuance of its goals. Integrating a self-access system in a language learning institution is not an easy task. Firstly, a self-access centre needs to be set up. This implies selecting an environment: a place (classes and offices) that requires sanitarian norms of working with multimedia resources; purchasing and developing various kinds of learning materials (computer learning programs, books, video and audio materials, worksheets, dictionaries, magazines, software, etc.), selecting and buying the necessary equipment (computers, notebooks and TV, CD and DVD, interactive boards, audio booths, video players, etc.) and providing the staff to ensure the smooth working of the self-access centre (counsellors, librarians, technical staff and office-managers). Secondly, teachers need to be involved in new tasks, such as organizing activities that imply self-access work, creating self-access language learning materials. Thirdly, the university administration needs to provide and support the necessary infrastructure so that all the parts of the self-access system work efficiently.

The first E-learning language center with self-access has been set up in Saratov State Technical University in 2006. In 3 years it has been constantly developing as a center of high-tech learning environment. Now it includes 2 multimedia classes with 16 computers in each, both classes are equipped with interactive boards, note-books and projectors, TV, video and audio players. During the 2-3d years of the project SSTU team completed the work on three e-learning programs (modules). The major work was concentrated around programmers’ work and proof reading. SSTU programmers continued programming and module testing. For pilot sessions 20 students and post-graduate students have been involved for trialing the materials of the module. To monitor and analyze student learning and involvement we interviewed them and made the necessary changes and modification in the module. Then the cover for CD was designed. Together with the Russian partners and foreign colleagues from Surrey and Oldenburg 8 modules were developed and piloted. Now all the modules are successfully used in the work of the Centres. During the project piloting in Saratov Technical University E-learning language center was operated by the following staff: two part-time managers and two technicians. Now it is served by a manager, a librarian and two technicians.

**II. SAC MANAGEMENT**

One issue which is to be considered and is widely debated is the role of management and the status of a manager in the SAC. It means that the SAC manager is not only to arrange the process of self-access learning but also to monitor and assess the results. The process of defining what management means in a self-access context is an important first step in deciding how the management of self-access should function and what its purpose is. The definition of management suitable for the context of a university SAC should include the following main items: the model of management, the method for implementing the model, the managerial role: the duties and responsibilities of the manager, the manager within the institutional context, management of staff, management of learners, management of resources, involving learners in management, training managers, evaluation of self-
access learning, self-access facilities and the manager. The experience in SAC management gained by the partnership of the three Technical Universities on the Volga is reflected in the adopted Rules and Regulations, as well as in Job Descriptions. The Rules and Regulations, although different in three universities in detail, specify the SAC’s goals, activities, and the staff duties.

Sometimes SACs are compared with the types of shops on what products one can find there and what system of structure is used. There are also different approaches to learning in the SAC. In a structured approach guidance is given to the learner on how to enter the system and how to move through it. A tutor recommends a course of study, the learners report to the tutor: face to face, by handing in a written account in the form of a journal. A semistructured approach relies on the learner taking responsibility for choosing the materials and skills they want to work on and learners are encouraged to explore the system and see how they can best make it work for themselves. In an unstructured self-access system the learner works with little or no guidance. The learners have to put together their own learning agenda and monitor their own progress. A self-access system may conform to a single type in typology; however, it may also be a combination of several types. A benefit of a flexible approach is the ability to change the system if and when required. The system must adapt to the new requirements of both learners and teachers. No self-access system should be considered ‘better’ than any other. In Surrey, Portsmouth, Oldenburg e-learning is used in different ways. It is used to enhance existing course, it is sometimes blended or replaces appropriate elements of course with e-learning or it is fully online. In fully online variant e-learning is used as primary course mechanism or e-learning component is the main or complete element of the course. By the way, the term ‘a self-access centre’ familiar worldwide was the “unknown” word for Russian foreign language teachers four years ago. Moreover, there was no information about Russian self-access centers for learning foreign languages. There were difficulties with interpreting the term as its first part - “self-access” was strongly associated in traditional mentality of university administration with anarchy and chaos in the university timetable.

Survey analysis and cascade trainings prove that the SAC has got great potential for organizing a more efficient process of learning foreign languages and achieving new goals. Further strategies for the SAC development were defined as follows: development of e-learning materials for the SAC, effective management, developing various ways of motivating students to use e-learning technologies in mastering foreign languages, tutorial system development, variety of learning activities including blended learning, choice of any learning level and access to the SAC at any time. The role of the SAC manager is great. The commonly accepted definition of management is “organization and control”. The managers are not only providing and furnishing spaces for learning and purchasing the equipment. The SAC manager arranges the process of self-access learning and also is the monitor and assessor of the results. SAC management technologies have opened up opportunities for the new ways of collaboration and exchange, allowing students to share their experiences, learn from others, reflect, solve open-ended problems, set learning objectives and assess their own results.

The role of foreign language counselors in the SAC is evidently new and crucial. The SAC managers of three partner Russian universities arranged the first staff training within the FLERTUV project as a cascading based on the experience gained in the University of Surrey, UK, where a fortnight training had been provided by Professor John Hobrough and Mrs Alison Savage. During the cascade training the crucial problems of SAC development were discussed:

- motive and needs analyses
- assessments
- providing pathways through materials
- providing workshops (for skills or particular materials)
- providing counselling
- uniting learners into study groups

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III. ACTIVITIES IN SSTU E-LEARNING LANGUAGE SAC (2007-2010)

E-learning language self-access centre has built its reputation on being a high-tech structure dedicated to cross-cultural communication, Language education and student services. An active SAC also has the potential to be a centre for research, allowing the teaching staff of all the different language programs a venue for innovative investigations into the language education and language acquisition. The following activities are accessible at the Centre of Saratov State technical University:

- **Autonomous work** – 3d-5th year students, bachelor and master students, postgraduate students of SSTU, teachers and other staff.
- **Piloting of Modules** - 3d-5th year students, bachelor and master students, postgraduate students of SSTU.
- **Blended Learning** - the combination of online learning and traditional learning approaches in various degrees. Lessons in small groups: students – translators in professional communication (program of applied qualification)- 15 groups: university teachers (2 groups), representatives of local business (1 group)
- **Special courses** in innovative technologies of teaching and learning, (including E-learning) for SSTU teachers, college teachers of Saratov region - 12 groups annually. Special courses in E-learning for SSTU teachers, college teachers of Saratov region:
  1) Pedagogic Essentials of Innovative and Information Technologies (18 hours);
  2) Problems of Quality in E-learning (18 hours);
  3) Pedagogy of Higher School (18 hours, 6 hours – lectures on e-learning)
- **Tutoring**: consultations for 3d-5th year students, bachelor and master students, postgraduate students of SSTU; teachers, studying at refreshing courses.
- **Seminars, round tables** (teachers and specialists in IT, administration of SSTU, colleagues from other universities, institute).

IV. Conclusions

Contrary to face-to-face teaching involving the full-time presence of a teacher guiding students’ learning activity in the classroom, self-access approach to language-learning gives all the students autonomous use of materials and resources to develop language skills and socio-cultural competences and to make their own learning decisions. The SAC provides a venue for students to interact with learners from other classes and language programs. It is a place to foster students helping students. Work in the SAC does not have to be separate from class work. Teachers can integrate SAC projects; the SAC provides a venue for students’ tasks into class materials to expand the range of what is possible in the classroom. The value of learner autonomy and responsibility instilled in learners at the SAC has a potential bonus to other courses.

The results of the project are disseminated at scientific conferences, in scientific publications, publications in local press, Internet, other forms of publicity as well as participation in a similar international project 25093, where the author was an individual expert. The final conference of the TEMPUS FLERTIV- project held in Saratov in June 2008 contributed to bringing the project outcomes to the attention of the academic community. The teachers from the three universities
demonstrated samples from the materials they had produced, piloted and had been using in practice. The presentations outlined the stages of the project implementation, the challenges and successes, the personal and institutional growth of all the participants involved. Teachers and university administrators from many Russian universities had a good opportunity to attend the conference. They declared their interest in the FL materials, E-learning SAC activity and their willingness to adopt e-learning and communicative approach to teaching FL for specific purposes.

It is important to note that foreign experts, participants of the final conference have underlined the high quality of the products (modules), communicative character of tasks, problem-solving tasks, austenitic materials and rich vocabulary for specific purposes. All aspects of speech communication (reading, writing, oral comprehension, speaking) have been taken into consideration in the development of modules. The attention and care given to every stage of the project implementation was very impressive. The extent of change will become obvious as the materials start to be used by more and more technical universities which will gain necessary and valuable skills in the English language for specific purposes using e-learning. The project was innovative and creative and in view of making a major contribution to the development of learning and training facilities within the region. The project implementation helped to change the FLT environment at the three state technical universities. It has got a lot of potential for developing the communicative approach in Russian Federation, as its results suit the aims and objectives of the RF educational standards of the 3-d generation and the programme of actions in the field of education that has been elaborated in Bologna Declaration.

There are of course some threats in further implementation of the project and the work of the Centres. Among them we can mention:

- Poor independent learning skills and poor language and intercultural competences among some first-years students (especially those who study on commercial agreements), difficulties in understanding coursework instructions.
- Short shelf life of the learning materials, danger not to keep up with time.
- In order to guarantee the sustainability of the project outcomes it is necessary to enhance the publicity campaigns in the cities and the regions.

References

