USING THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CERVANTES INSTITUTE VIRTUAL AUDIENCE IN THE EDUCATIONAL MODEL OF THE RUSSIAN HIGHER SCHOOL

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Abstract

At present, the issue of introducing virtual learning is gaining a key sound in the world of linguo-didactics. Almost all educational institutions choose virtual learning not only as a means to attract new enrolees, but also as a new working model that could combine and make effective various organizational, cultural, technical and commercial initiatives in a new format via the use of information technologies and the vast capacity of educational platforms.

In this paper, the authors focus on the most successful Internet project in the field of teaching the Spanish language, the virtual platform of the Instituto Cervantes (the Cervantes Institute). The experience of the Cervantes Institute allowed the authors to systematize methodological principles of our work and it initiated the creation of a corpus of electronic training materials that allow to carry out remote work. It involves larger groups of students, correctly distributing the classroom activity in such a way that part of the assignments are performed at home during extracurricular time and further is discussed in class. The created virtual materials include phonetic, lexical, grammatical, socio-cultural components, as well as texts illustrating various spheres of communication of native speakers. Since the authors of the article work at a law institute, we believe that audio recordings of trial simulation, authentic speeches of politicians on issues of the legal and international sphere may be of particular interest.

Keywords: Virtual audience, educational platform, teaching practice, educational activity.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Instituto Cervantes (The Cervantes Institute) is a Spanish governmental institution set up in 1991 to teach the Spanish language and spread the Spanish and Latin American cultures. In the late nineties the Cervantes Institute carried out active research and development of technologies in the field of virtual teaching of the Spanish language, becoming one of the pioneers in this field. In 2003, the educational platform called Aula Virtual del Español, AVE, (Virtual audience of the Spanish language) was released [14]. The number of students enrolled on this platform is increasing. According to the document, "Instituto Cervantes in figures. Course 2014-2015 ", more than 30000 people have taken virtual courses as individual students, and a huge number of students use this platform in their universities, educational centres and transnational corporations thanks to the licenses acquired in these centres. As an example, Chinese universities or the American Starbucks Corporation can be mentioned, whose employees learn Spanish on the Cervantes platform. Over 14 thousand licenses to learn Spanish (AVE) have been sold via the Virtual

Audience of the Spanish language which is now available on mobile devices. This figure is by 10% higher than last year's sales [8]. Doctor of Philology Víctor Coto Ordás calls the Virtual Audience of Spanish an unprecedented commercial success in teaching foreign languages through the Internet and a model of "good practices" for all educational centres wishing to virtualize their training programs [7]. It is important to emphasize that the platform was created with serious state support, in particular with the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Spain, which actively oversees the activities of the Instituto Cervantes, as well as with the participation of leading Spanish universities such as Alcalá de Henares, La Rioja and Alicante University. It is necessary to note that the platform closely cooperates with the Association of Academies of the Spanish Language (la Asociación de Academias de la Lengua (Española)): the aim of the cooperation is to present on this platform not only the Pyrenean national version of the Spanish language, but also Latin American versions of the language, diversity of different national options.

1.1 How It Works

One of the creators of the platform H.P. Basterrechea Moreno repeatedly stressed that the project was a significant breakthrough in the field of the evolution and modernization of the teaching practice, since the flexibility of digital didactic resources and online communication systems allow to overcome the time and space limitations imposed on the teacher and students by the format of educational activity lined up in the framework of physical presence in the classroom. Moreover, the virtual format allows involving and serving the needs of new and large groups of students, which contributes to the international spread of the Spanish language and the growth of its influence. [4, 5: 10]

In addition to the growing number of its course participant, the platform is moving forward in the field of technical innovations. As it has already been mentioned, in 2003 an original version of AVE was created, which was improved in 2007, and a new AVE-2 appeared. The new version contains such Web-2 applications that allow you to create blogs, wikis and various forms of polls from the section that the teacher controls.

All activities of the educational platform, created by the Instituto Cervantes are implemented in full accordance with the Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (European Common Framework of Reference), the European system of levels of foreign language proficiency, according to which the basis for teaching a foreign language is the communicative approach, involving implementation of assignments not only of a linguistic nature, but also by active use of communicative language strategies, and at the meantime the fulfilment of tasks should not be automatic or routine [6: 15-16].

Thus, AVE is built in such a way that the final result of the acquired knowledge and skills is the practice, such as, preparing a dish, following the recipe in a foreign language, transforming the language information into a real life situation. We should emphasize that all tasks of the virtual audience have practical orientation, which allows students to apply the obtained material in a specific situation.

Speaking of the structure of AVE, in recent years it has become significantly more complicated. If, at its beginning the platform was built as virtual Spanish courses for general purposes (cursos de español general), then it was adapted to the needs of different groups of users. Thus, special courses were created for the international DELE diploma (Spanish as a foreign language), preparing for the examination, as well as special courses aimed at children and adolescents, such as ¡Hola, amigos!, which were prepared in close cooperation with the TV channel Antena 3 Televisión. In addition, the materials of the platform were used to create intensive courses intended for immigrant students, as well as for groups of students studying at Spanish universities on exchange programs.

Currently AVE offers 16 different courses (A1-C1 levels) corresponding to the European system of language mastering, each of which lasts 30 hours. Students can have access to the course materials within three months. There is also the possibility of choosing a course that involves the support of a teacher (tutor), or a fully autonomous training on the materials offered [16]. There are 48 topics on the platform, which can be selected separately, if the students aim to expand his/her knowledge in any particular area and with a specific communicative focus, for example, topic 11, level C1: AVE Global. Tema 11. Superior C1.4. El español y su literatura. Instituciones de la lengua y el fomento de la lectura. Spanish language and its literature. Within the framework of the course the listener should learn to choose from several options offered, express doubt or confidence, talk about the authenticity of the text, tell a story or legend, write a review on a literary work, write biographies, and meet the basic institutions in the field of Spanish teaching and with Hispanic publishing sphere [15].

Each topic is designed for 10 hours and access is provided for three weeks. Such topicality is a wonderful opportunity for obtaining specific knowledge. The Virtual audience offers 6 courses for teachers: to take the

courses it is necessary to have a diploma in the relevant field.

1.1.1 Structure

Thus, AVE has an extremely transparent and understandable structure, the names of topics are also practical and communicative: Travel, Shopping, Emotions and Senses, etc. Each topic is studied during nine virtual sessions, each of which lasts about an hour on-line, and each session consists of various language and communication tasks that appear on the screen in the form of one or several windows depending on the degree of complexity. Thus, by choosing a specific topic, the student can see sessions that it consists of and start working with this section, or use additional material in the form of grammar cards or material that allows you to work out pronunciation or spelling skills. Clear indexing system allows you to go directly to the material of interest. At the end of each topic the student does a self-control test, that is, fills in a form that is automatically evaluated. In case a course is selected, and it presupposes the tutor control, then the student does the final task, which is checked by the teacher. At the end of each topic there is a so-called "graphic adventure", that is a kind of video game, where all the content of the theme is repeated in an entertaining form. The platform interface is organized in such a way that the navigation tools allow the user to instantly determine in which section the learner is located, change the session, move forward or return to the previous level. The creators of the platform emphasized that the advantage to identify his/her own "route of travel" through training resources can easily turn into an obstacle in case the user cannot determine at which point of the path he/she is on [14].

1.1.2 Materials

Speaking about the materials presented on the platform, it should be noted that the authors were able to unite a huge number of research that allow a wide variety of aspects to be worked out in understanding of oral and written texts, expression and creation of texts, interaction and communicative mediation. To fulfil it, a wide variety of materials were created and adapted: interactive tests and questionnaires, video games, literary texts, as well as texts from media sources, idiomatic expressions, songs and short video films. Discussing the repertoire of the collected materials, we emphasize once again that the virtual platform can be considered a "pan Hispanic" tool for teaching the Spanish language, which allows, starting with the advanced level of language proficiency, to follow the principle of relevance and to show the linguistic and cultural richness of the Spanish language through the examples of authentic texts representing various national variants of Spanish, as well as audio recordings, read by the native speakers.

Juan Lázaro, one of the authors of the Virtual Audience, calls the national language features offered in the AVE materials "geolectos de estandar" (geolects of standard), which differs from the central version of the Spanish language, and which she calls the preferred variant "variedad preferente" [9: 18].

The "Pan-Hispanish" approach to teaching Spanish as a foreign language should be recognized as an extremely important and new trend in teaching. As Russian scholar G.Stepanov noted, teaching in the previous stages unfortunately was guided exclusively by the Pyrenean norm, that is, the language norm of the Spanish language that exists on the peninsula: "Judging from the materials we observed and conversations with the European Spanish language researchers there was no question on which phonetic, pronunciation and other norms should be used when teaching Spanish. In Russia and in the USSR they have always been teaching … the normative Spanish language in its proper Spanish variety" [2: 50-51]. The "Pan-Spanish" approach to teaching Spanish as a foreign language should be recognized as an extremely important and new trend in teaching. According to academician N.Firsova, a G. Stepanov follower, in the light of the new requirements for a foreign languages teaching ... it is necessary not only to teach students a foreign language as a means of real communication, but also as a means of intercultural communication" [3: 68]. After studying Spanish, the student and future specialist should be able to communicate not only with the Spaniards, but also with the inhabitants of Latin American countries.

2 CULTURAL WINDOW

Thus, the Virtual audience of the Instituto Cervantes opens a new "Pan Hispanic" page in the study of Spanish as a foreign language. As noted by H.P. Basterrechea Moreno and Juan Lázaro, the selection of material for the virtual platform was based on a rigorous scientific and systematic analysis of the linguistic and cultural variations of the national Spanish versions of Spanish and Latin American [10: 10].

Following the Instituto Cervantes in the way they organise their own lessons, the authors use the methodological achievements of the Institute and their own experience, introducing students the differences in national variations. In Spain, for example, an interpreter who is entitled to legalize documents and who translates legal proceedings is called *traductor jurado*, in Mexico the term *Perito Traductor* is used. At the

same time, Russian sources translate *perito* as a "witness or expert" [1: 118]. Thus, the phrase "the document must be certified by an official translator" in Spain and Mexico will be translated in different ways. Or, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Spain is translated as *Ministerio de asuntos exteriores y de cooperación* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation), in Colombia it is Cancillería, in Mexico and Honduras they call it *Secretaría de relaciones exteriores*. Students should know these constructions and do not translate the Colombian ministry as a "*chancery*", and the title of minister as "*chancellor*" [12].

The virtual platform of the Cervantes Institute can be called a kind of cultural window into the world of the Spanish language. As noted by Hernández Sánchez, in the process of learning the language students should study the system of signs that denote the objects, but also study the form of thinking, values, beliefs, traditions [12: 24]. In relation to this the authors of the article also create a corpus of materials that make it possible to turn the students into true "*hablantes interculturales*", real carriers of inter-ethnic culture, if such a term is possible to introduce into the phenomenon. This is necessary so that in the real and everyday life, in communication with native speakers of various versions of the Spanish language, in their future professional activities the future specialists could avoid cultural shock, misunderstanding in different situations in which it is not enough to master only the grammar norms and have a certain command in lexis, but have opportunity to cope with possible conflict situations and comfortably adapt to the surrounding language and cultural environment.

2.1 Avoiding Mistakes

Another extremely important feature of the Virtual Audience is its "political correctness". In today's world, torn by conflict, rampant racial intolerance, one often faces discrimination on the basis of language. This educational aspect seems to be the key to authors. The official website of the Cervantes Institute notes that when selecting didactic materials, an attempt was made to achieve two conflicting goals. On the one hand, to create *"una imagen realista de la sociedad contemporánea"* (a realistic image of the modern society), presenting examples that demonstrate significant social diversification in the modern world, on the other hand, *"promover una imagen positiva de las diferencias y de las minorías"* (create and promote a positive impression and perception of differences and minorities) [13].

The authors of the article also adhere to the principle of political correctness in their teaching and pedagogical activity. We select training materials in such a way that, while representing the diversity of the cultures of the Hispanic world, we can contribute to the development of a position of tolerance and respect for all ethnic groups and religions. In the classroom we organize discussions that allow students to develop critical thinking in relation to various social and moral aspects, and any stated position should be duly argued and based on the principle of tolerance or, possibly, neutrality. Let us give an example from a practical lesson on political translation. When translating an article from the Spanish newspaper El Pais, *"Los independentistas catalanes intentan poros de los medios mantener un censo online"* [11], (The Catalan independentistas try by all means to maintain an online census), the students were first offered a translation option term *Los independentistas* as "fighters for the independence of Catalonia", suggesting a positive assessment of the activities of the Catalan government. The second option was the phrase "Catalan separatists", which has a very sharp negative connotation and assumes a clear political assessment. The teacher offered an option of "supporters of independence", which has a more neutral tone. Of course, thanks to these examples, students not only master the skills of translation, but also learn tolerance and impartiality in their assessments and judgments.

3 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be noted that over the past decade, the Virtual Auditorium of the Spanish language of the Cervantes Institute has become the most significant, known and prestigious platform in the field of virtual learning of Spanish as a foreign language. The authors of the article consider it as one of the reference points of their work, a certain base and starting point from the methodological and technological positions. At the heart of Cervantes' Virtual Audience are not only new information technologies, but also the principles of scientific didactics, guided by which the founders of the platform have developed the content and goals of each stage of training, the typology of tasks, the presentation of various language registers and examples from various national variants of the Spanish language.

In addition, we offer a number of language and speech exercises, as well as lists of unit words.   A set of relevant evaluation tests are developed, which students can take in the electronic format. In our everyday activity we combine various teaching methods: grammar-translating, audio-visual, audio-lingual (working with phonograms), conscious-practical, communicative. In connection with the ongoing processes in the modern Catalonia on self-determination, our audio-visual corpus has been enlarged with a significant number of

audiovisual materials: meetings of the parliament, speeches by members of the government, televised debates on this topic. The students watch these videos at home and then in the classroom we simulate a similar discussion with the expression of various positions, which is interesting for law students in terms of the future profession and is an additional motivating factor: students refer to the constitution of Spain, Russia, other countries in search of arguments to prove their position, resort to various sources of historical, legal, journalistic nature, which allows you to build a whole educational and cognitive chain. Following the principle of political correctness materials for training are selected both from government sources and from the opposition media, which allows to present the state of things in a real and objective context.

We would also note that our students create virtual conferences, chats and forums where they jointly solve didactic tasks set in front of them, which makes the learning process more dynamic, and the students themselves become, to a large extent, the protagonists of this process. Thus, following the Instituto Cervantes in the centre of our learning model, we put the active independent bilingual (polylingual) and bicultural (multicultural) language personality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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