



MEDIADIDACTICS
AND ELECTRONIC TEACHING MEANS
МЕДИАДИДАКТИКА
И ЭЛЕКТРОННЫЕ СРЕДСТВА ОБУЧЕНИЯ

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Scientific article

**Creating an Online Russian as a Foreign Language Course
during the COVID-19 Epidemic**

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Abstract. In March 2020, due to the coronavirus epidemic all Italian universities switched to online classes and managed to ensure the right to education. Making the switch to online learning, teachers faced new difficulties that they had to sort out immediately. The purpose of the research is to provide scientific and methodological substantiation of the development of the online course of Russian as a foreign language at the University of Bologna. Due to the coronavirus lockdown, such a course was considered as the only possible way to provide the educational process. The author of the article made an attempt to empirically determine the potential of information technology used to organize a productive learning environment for language learners (including Russian-language learners). The article analyses the way the online educational process was organized to teach Russian to political science students of the University of Bologna (Forli Campus). The researcher studied the structure and functions of the IOL and Virtuale learning environment on the Moodle platform, as well as the means of interaction between students and teachers. The methods for analysing distance learning research papers and empirical methods for assessing the communicative-speech activity of Italian students attending the online Russian language course were used. Apart from that, based on the results of the survey conducted to find out the learners' attitude to online education, a psychological and pedagogical analysis of the students' educational activities was carried out. The researcher clarified the definition of e-learning, and considered the cognitive theory of multimedia learning in terms of effective transmission of information during the educational process and direct communication with students. As for the theoretical significance of the article, the author made an attempt to substantiate the need to create and use distance courses for students learning foreign languages (in particular Russian). As for the practical significance of this work, the researcher developed practice-oriented modular computer

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environment to teach Russian as a foreign language and considered computer-assisted language learning. Methodologies to increase linguistic, communicative and regional geographic competencies of Italian students were developed. In addition, new multimedia educational resources were introduced into the process of teaching political science students. The author summed up the results of the study, analysed the weak and strong points of the online course and proposed the ways to improve it.

Keywords: Russian as a foreign language, distance learning, information technology, learning platform, Moodle, multimedia, electronic resources, video communication system

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has forced states and governments around the world to completely rethink the entire education system and switch to distance learning. Despite the total lockdown, the University of Bologna found a quick solution to this problem in March 2020, and within two weeks the academic community switched to distance learning ensuring the right to education for all students. The relevance of the study is determined by the need for the revision of the education system in the context of the pandemic.

In the article the author substantiates the need to use new information technologies like computer-assisted language learning in teaching Russian as a foreign language to political science students of the University of Bologna who have to attend online classes during the quarantine. Distance learning is considered as a new emergency measure and the only possible form of education, which is introduced to develop the communicative and linguistic competence of students in a non-language environment.

It should be noted that Italian students learn Russian outside the language environment. The Internet is the only source they can use to learn about the rich culture and language of Russia. In this regard, online learning as one of the forms of distance education provides new opportunities and resources for those who want to master the language and develop their communication skills.

According to research papers, teachers can use Internet resources and new technologies to develop online courses and to motivate students to spend more time learning the target language (Azimov, 1996; Bovtenko, 2005; Bogomolov, 2013; Bukharkina, Polat, 2008; Gartsov, 2006; Dunaeva, 2006; Zaitseva, 2003; Polat, 2001; Rozina, 2005; Rudenko-Morgun et al., 2003, etc.).

The problem of distance learning has been under discussion for a long time (Azimov, 1989; Bovtenko, 2005; Bogomolov, 2008; Bukharkina et al., 2004; Gartsov, 2007; Polat et al., 2001; Rudenko-Morgun, 2006; Shchennikov, 2002;

Calvani, 2006; Calvani, Rotta, 2000; Caon, Serragiotto, 2012; Ranieri, 2004, etc.). Since the late nineties, e-learning has been defined as online learning, online education, computer assisted learning, computer-supported collaborative learning, etc. Thus, e-learning includes methodological and technological tools for organizing computer-aided learning. It should be noted that e-learning methods and technologies are constantly developing. Selecting classroom technologies, teachers should consider a number of factors (the specifics of the educational process, the course, content of the course and learning objectives) (Ranieri, 2004: 41).

It is still too early to assess the effectiveness of online learning, because there is little empirical evidence. Due to the coronavirus epidemic, the educational institutions had to switch to online classes, and specialists and methodologists concluded that it was crucial to implement e-learning. The author of the article analysed the way the new information technologies were used in the process of teaching Russian as a foreign language online. The elementary level course was launched in March 2020 and it was aimed at political science students of the University of Bologna (Forlì Campus). The author of the article analysed the structure of the course (students started with the Russian alphabet and learnt different aspects of the language including the accusative case) and the exam results. Teachers had little time to adapt to new conditions and switch to distance learning. Thus, all the above-mentioned facts emphasise the relevance of the topic of the article.

Purpose

The purpose of the article is to provide scientific and methodological substantiation of the development of the online course of Russian as a foreign language at the University of Bologna. Due to the coronavirus lockdown, such a course was considered as the only possible way to provide the educational process. The author of the article made an attempt to empirically determine the potential of information technology used to build a productive learning environment for language learners (including Russian-language learners).

Research methods and materials

The author used the methods for analysing distance learning research papers and empirical methods for assessing the communicative-speech activity of Italian students attending the online Russian language course. Apart from that, based on the results of the survey conducted to find out the learners' attitude to online education, the author carried out a psychological and pedagogical analysis of the students' educational activities.

Results

During the coronavirus epidemic in March 2020, the students who enrolled in the course "Russian Language and Laboratory 1" at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna had to attend only online classes to

study the language. The course consists of 30 theoretical lessons taught by a teacher (the author of this article), and 40 laboratory practical classes with a native speaker (L. Buglakova, a colleague of the author, who has been conducting distance education research for over 20 years). Unfortunately, the pandemic has not ended yet. So the students continue to attend the online course “Russian Language and Laboratory 2.”

The learners studied and interacted on the Moodle educational platform. The communicative multimedia course “Краски”/“Kraski” (for students who learn the Russian language independently) was uploaded to the platform. The students had access to Russian grammar materials and schemes, audio and video files, that the teacher presented at the lectures. On the platform there were files with audio and video materials, forums, audio assignments which were checked and commented on by the teacher; various types of tasks (cloze, multiple choice, etc.) and sample tests were implemented, for example, typical tests in order to prepare for a written exam.

The effectiveness of the online course was proved by first-year students’ exam results. Despite the fact that the educational process was organized online, most students got high grades: 49% of students scored maximum points (22 students scored 30/30, 10 students scored 29/30). Only 7% had a score below 24/30.

As the pandemic has not yet ended, the course “Russian Language and Laboratory 1” continues online.

Discussion

At present, an educational process cannot be organized effectively without IT. Therefore, teachers must acquire the necessary technological and methodological competencies to facilitate independent learning. Facing these challenging tasks, the European Center for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (ECML)¹ takes into account the role of the digital revolution in teaching and learning foreign languages and promotes the projects that aim to develop teachers’ digital skills and critical awareness of the need to create online teaching resources for their effective use in the educational process. On the website of the European Center we can find out that the new tools are changing the methods of teaching foreign languages. The Internet makes it possible to use authentic materials; students who use smartphones, Skype and e-mail can communicate with people from different parts of the world; social networks mass media constantly keep citizens informed about current events.

In this complex educational space, foreign language teachers need to find innovative strategies and ways to use the new tools and make the teaching process more interesting. In addition, the educational process should remain effective and

¹ European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe. URL: <https://www.ecml.at/Thematicareas/NewMediaInLanguageEducation/tabid/1630/language/en-GB/Default.aspx> (accessed: 04.10.2020).

it is vital to preserve traditional teaching values. To solve a number of challenging tasks, teachers need to be aware of the emerging trends in information technology and to be able to choose suitable software and hardware. Moreover, teachers need to learn how to use new tools in the new classroom. As for learners, they can easily improve their technological skills.

The following questions arouse considering how children and adults learn with the help of IT: is it necessary to model the educational process in a linear format or only restructure it? Is it necessary to develop methods which implement new tools and means as integral and effective components into educational programs? It is even harder to combine traditional educational resources with new tools.

A.N. Shchukin noted that “distance learning holds great promise, as it allows you to use the world's cultural and educational values accessible on the Internet, and gives you an opportunity to be taught by the best teachers in the common information and educational space” (Shchukin, 2004: 92–93).

Distance learning is effective only if it meets modern requirements in professional training and combines traditional and new ways to develop students' linguistic competencies.

However, teachers sometimes can find it problematic to use e-learning methodologies and tools. Distance education can be effectively organized under the right conditions.

First of all, a solid technological infrastructure and qualified technical personnel are required to develop information educational platforms. Secondly, these staff should be aware of what teachers need in order to develop multimedia and interactive teaching materials. Thus, the teacher has to perform new functions. According to A.N. Bogomolov: “The terminological apparatus of distance education is at the stage of formation, and therefore currently the place and role of the teacher in the e-learning system are not determined yet...” [Bogomolov, 2007: 106]. The teacher is not only a tutor-facilitator and moderator in the educational process, but he/she is also a computer science expert, when he/she is creating his/her own teaching materials and place them in a new learning environment.

Technological, content and organizational components make it possible to create an effective online learning space for students who learn Russian as a foreign language independently. The content component is provided by the teacher, who organizes and conducts the educational process which is technically supported. To organize an effective e-learning process, teachers need to develop suitable training materials and keep in mind that distance education is not just transfer of knowledge.

Researchers still have to focus on the problem how to organize multimedia didactic communication. An American educator and psychologist Richard Mayer dealt with this issue and developed the cognitive theory of multimedia learning. Based on the theory of constructivism in the learning process (the thesis that knowledge is actively constructed) and Allan Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, Richard Mayer proposes a way of presenting didactic content in order to design

an interface and create useful educational multimedia materials. Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning is based on three main assumptions: there are two separate channels (auditory and visual) for processing information; the perceived verbal and visual information is generalized and adequately combined in the working memory. Humans can only process a finite amount of information in a channel at a time; new visual or verbal information is integrated with prior knowledge in the long-term memory (Clark, Mayer, 2011: 39).

Multimedia learning process is based on a number of fundamental principles:

- people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone (Multimedia Principle);

- people learn better when corresponding words and pictures are presented near rather than far from each other on the page or screen (Spatial Contiguity Principle);

- people learn better when corresponding words and pictures are presented simultaneously rather than successively (Temporal Contiguity Principle);

- people learn better when extraneous words, pictures and sounds are excluded rather than included (Coherence Principle);

- people learn better from graphics and narrations than from animation and on-screen text (Modality Principle). Research has shown that students learn verbal information better if they can see pictures;

- people learn better from graphics and narration than from graphics, narration and on-screen text (Redundancy Principle).

According to Mayer, multimedia learning becomes part of the educational process if no channel is overloaded with essential processing demands.

As for the Russian language course for political science students of the University of Bologna, the teachers selected specific models and strategies to facilitate language learning. It was necessary to understand how to create a comfortable and positive learning environment. The Alma Mater academic community had access to the educational platform IOL. Teachers uploaded educational electronic resources and didactic materials to the platform.

It should be noted that online teaching takes twice more time, and the role of the teacher changes. For example, giving online lessons on the platform Microsoft Teams, teachers understood that it is necessary to accompany their speech with the text on slides so that students could concentrate. The multimedia principles help to create optimal distance learning: text and pictures are integrated with each other when visual and auditory materials are presented simultaneously [Clark, Mayer, 2011: 41]. Therefore, teachers had to urgently prepare all didactic materials in accordance with multimedia principles. According to recommendations of Clark and Mayer, teachers selected images and useful texts on the topic of the lesson (Multimedia Principle); words and pictures on the screen were integrated (Spatial Contiguity Principle), insignificant information was excluded (Coherence Principle). Moreover, to draw students' attention to the most important information, teachers always used visual graphic (i. e. words in bold and in italics, un-

derlined words, coloured messages in different fonts and sizes, images, positioning the elements in the centre of the screen, etc.).

The emotional aspect of language learning played an important role. Teachers uploaded photographs and video fragments about picturesque places in Russia and popular Russian songs. Thus, multimedia learning aroused students' interest and motivated them to study.

At the University of Bologna, synchronous online classes were organized on the Microsoft Teams platform. Apart from that, the teachers used the Moodle platform called IOL (Insegnamenti OnLine, i. e. online learning) to arrange distance education. At the beginning of 2020–2021 academic year, the IOL platform was improved and it was called Virtuale. Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is freely distributed for creating educational content, which best meets the didactic requirements of educators and computer science experts.

About 60 first-year students and 40 second-year students regularly attended online classes on the Teams platform. Teachers and students could chat during the video conferencing lessons. For various reasons students did not turn on microphones and webcams (they felt uncomfortable or shy, the Internet connection was slow, etc.). Online chat supported students and teachers during online lessons. Messages were saved in the chat history and were accessible to the users at any time. Students can freely use chat when they have technical, methodological and organizational problems. With the help of chat students could deliver necessary information, get in touch via “raise hand” function. This allowed to follow the rules of netiquette, i. e. professional and social etiquette in electronic communication.

At the beginning of their studies, students did not use chat in Russian, but then they were recommended to chat in the target language, since it helped students to communicate with native speakers.

Specific diagrams and multimedia resources were uploaded to the CLA platform (Centro Linguistico di Ateneo) of the University Linguistic Center (Forlì campus) and were accessible to learners. As for the communicative multimedia course for learning Russian “Краски А1 и А2”/“Kraski A1 and A2” [Berardi, Buglakova, 2006, 2007], due to copyright restrictions, it could not be uploaded to the IOL or Virtuale platform and students could not have free access to it. In fact, since the early 2000s, the Linguistic Center has carried out research and experimental language teaching projects using new information technologies, and teachers still use the website and get access to didactic materials. On the website of the Center there are articles on distance learning; language assessment tests; European language proficiency tests; multimedia electronic resources for independent learning and materials students can use to prepare for their language exams. Students can learn the language on the platform independently as the system automatically checks their assignments and corrects mistakes.

During online training, the communicative multimedia course “Краски”/“Kraski” met the requirements of distance learning: assignments were checked automatical-

ly, videoclips had Italian translation, lexical and grammar materials helped the students learn Russian independently.

One of the most effective tasks was an audio task. Students had to read the attached text, record short stories about themselves and their typical day and upload the audio files in due time. Some of them consulted the teacher about pronunciation, phonetics and grammar. It helped students to pass their oral exam successfully. As for the teachers, it was easier for them to find out students' typical mistakes and organize a proper teaching process.

The students also had to take online tests and oral exams. The automatically checked tests were uploaded to the IOL platform. As for the open cloze worksheets, students filled in the gaps with the accusative or prepositional case endings, uploaded the files and sent them to the teacher. Students did their writing tests on Teams or Zoom's video-conferencing platforms.

It should be noted that in order to create and conduct online exams, the teacher had to acquire a set of technological skills and use modern teaching tools. To learn new skills, teachers can attend the webinars or brief courses organized by CESIA, i. e. the Computer Services Department of the University of Bologna.

Since the beginning of 2020–2021 academic year, the “Russian Language and Laboratory 2” course has been following the blended learning model: the teacher delivers half of the lectures online, and the rest of the lessons are taught in the classroom and online simultaneously. Practical classes are organized both in the classroom and online. Classrooms in different departments and faculties of the University of Bologna have special equipment and facilities to organize online and offline lessons. The teachers had to learn new skills and methods to continue teaching under the constantly changing conditions.

After each lesson, the teachers have to immediately upload electronic resources, audio and video materials, tests and texts about the history and politics of the Russian Federation to the CLA learning environment.

A survey “Learning before and during the COVID-19 epidemic” among the students enrolled in the courses “Russian Language and Laboratory 1” and “Russian Language and Laboratory 2” showed how the students perceived online learning during the epidemic, which goals were achieved and how the educational process could be improved under the challenging conditions. The questionnaire contained questions, designed for the students of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Bologna, and then 46 political science students also filled out the questionnaire on the CLA platform.

There were 10 questions (general and more detailed, about Russian language course) about the educational process in the second semester of 2019–2020 academic year. 46 students of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna (Forlì campus) took part in the research.

The first question was “Which year do you study in?”. It showed that there were 2nd year bachelor students (15%); 3rd year bachelor students (48%); senior students (2%); 1st year master's students (7%); 2nd year master's students (35%)

of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna (Forlì campus).

The second question “How many online courses did you attend in the second semester of 2019–2020 academic year?” got the following answers: 7 students (15.2%) attended 5 courses; 20 students (43.4%) attended 4 courses, 14 students (30.4%) attended 3 courses and 5 students (10.8%) attended only 2 courses (Figure 1).

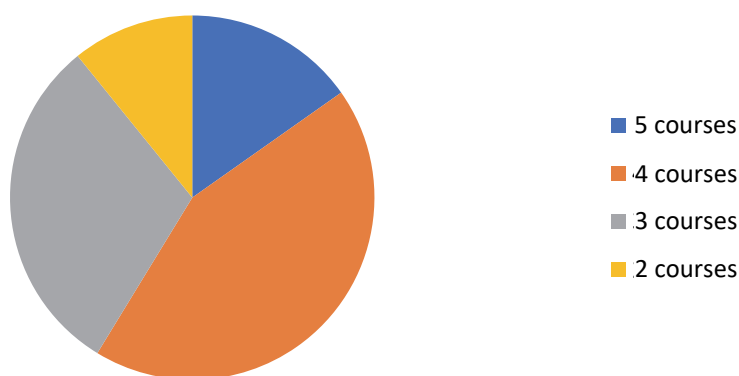


Figure 1. Online attendance, the second semester of 2019–2020 academic year

The third question was connected with the second one and was as follows: “How many percent of classes did you attend?”. 87% of the respondents attended about 75% of the classes. Only 4% of students attended less than half of the classes, and 9% of the respondents attended 50 % of the lessons.

The fourth question was about the use of informational means: “Do you think that chat in Microsoft Teams made the lectures more interactive?”. According to five-point score, where 1 point is the lowest degree and 5 is the highest one, 4% respondents scored 1 point, 15% – 2 points, 28% – 3 points, 35% – 4 points, and 17% – 5 points. The answers showed that chat made the lectures more interactive.

Answering the fifth question “Did you use IOL platform to download didactic materials?”, 96% of the respondents (44 students) answered affirmatively, and 4 % (2 students) – negatively.

The sixth question “Do you consider IOL and Teams useful means of online education?” got 100 % positive answers.

The seventh question “Which resources of IOL platform do you consider useful for teaching the Russian language” was answered as follows: 80% of the students said that the most effective resource was the communicative multimedia course “Краски”/“Kraski”, 96% of the students found diagrams and tables very useful, 59% of the respondents claimed that audio and video materials facilitated the learning of the language, 50% of the students found audio assignments quite effective (Figure 2).

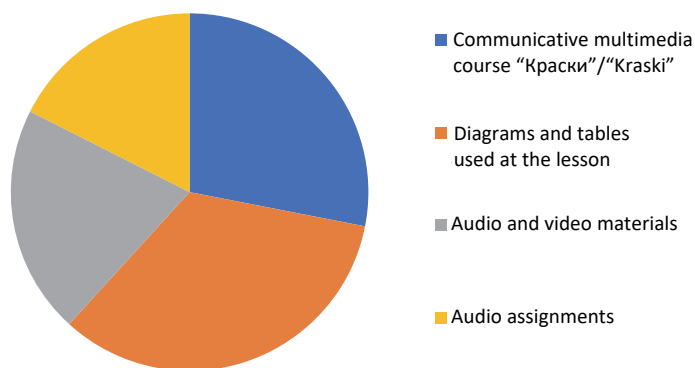


Figure 2. Useful online resources uploaded to the IOL platform

The eighth, ninth and tenth questions were open. The eighth question “What positive aspects of online teaching Russian language can you point out?” showed:

- professionalism and flexibility of teachers who despite the challenging conditions managed to organize an effective educational process;
- access to the learning materials;
- time management (without the necessity to commute to the University);
- new IT skills;
- students’ active interaction. Even though there was no face-to-face contact, they felt like members of the community;
- improving students’ speaking skills despite the epidemic and isolation;
- convenience and flexibility of online education.

The ninth question “What negative aspects of online learning Russian can you point out?” revealed the following disadvantages:

- lack of face-to-face communication and personal contact with the teacher and fellow-students;
- too much time in front of a computer screen;
- difficulties in concentration;
- fast explanations because of lack of feedback from students who kept their cameras off;
- long silent pauses, when only a few students were answering the teacher's questions.

Answering the tenth question “How can we improve this form of education?”, students proposed the following ways:

- lectures should be recorded and uploaded to the platform. Thus, students can watch them again if they need to;
- students can interact more if they make presentations and engage in group work;
- teachers should find the way how to keep students involved in the lesson when they do not answer the teacher’s questions (when they keep their microphones and webcams off).

Conclusion

The challenging conditions of the coronavirus epidemic made distance learning (e-learning) an important element of building the society based on knowledge. The aim of the government in reference to education is to adapt national traditional educational systems to the conditions of the information society, to carry out educational reforms in accordance with modern global technological trends.

Learning online is our reality. There have been defined new requirements to education, in general, and teaching foreign languages (and the Russian language as well), in particular. Online educational process during the pandemic has to provide real education both out of classroom and out of language environment. And this is the most challenging task for teachers.

Under the conditions of distance education, students need constant support of teachers who simultaneously analyse knowledge transition online, trace knowledge interaction and acquiring language and communicative competencies, stimulate interest to the language and culture being learned, provide constant feedback.

The author of the article analysed the online Russian as a foreign language course for political science students at the University of Bologna, and this analysis demonstrates its positive aspects compared with traditional training tools. In addition, the author proposed the ways to solve problems arising in establishing and organising the new and innovative process of teaching Russian with the help of IT. Of course, these education innovations have their advantages and disadvantages, and they pose new challenges for the society. The potential of distance training tools in teaching foreign languages is unlimited and for this reason needs further consideration according with methods of teaching languages based on new forms of interaction in virtual learning environment.

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Научная статья

Моделирование онлайн-курса по русскому языку как иностранному в период эпидемии COVID-19

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Аннотация. В марте 2020 года из-за эпидемии коронавируса все вузы Италии перешли на удаленное обучение и смогли обеспечить право на образование всем учащимся. Переход на онлайн-обучение поставил перед преподавателями новые задачи и вопросы, на которые надо было незамедлительно реагировать. Целью исследования стало научно-методическое обоснование моделирования онлайн-курса по русскому языку как иностранному в Болонском университете в качестве экстренной и единственно возможной в данный момент формы обучения во время вынужденного карантина из-за эпидемии коронавируса, эмпирическое определение потенциала информационных технологий и их возможность создать перспективную образовательную среду для обучения русскому языку как иностранному. Для реализации поставленной цели выявлена специфика учебного процесса студентов-политологов бакалавриата и магистратуры Болонского университета в кампусе г. Форли, которые начали изучать русский язык дистанционно. Были определены структура, функция образовательной среды IOL и Virtuale на основе оболочки Moodle, а также средства взаимодействия студентов и преподавателей в ней. Использовались методы анализа научной литературы, а также эмпирические методы наблюдения за коммуникативно-речевой деятельностью итальянских учащихся в процессе прохождения курса русского языка в удаленном формате, психолого-педагогический анализ их учебной деятельности на основе проведенных опросов об отношении студентов к дистанционному обучению в условиях форс-мажора. В ходе исследования были уточнены определения e-learning, рассмотрена когнитивная теория мультимедийного обучения для организации эффективной передачи информации во время учебного процесса и прямой связи со студентами. Теоретическое значение статьи заключается в обосновании возможности создания и использования дистанционных курсов для обучения иностранным языкам, в частности русскому как иностранному. Практическое значение данной работы состоит в разработке практико-ориентированной модульной компьютерной среды для обучения студентов РКИ, видов компьютерного методического обеспечения. Разработаны приемы формирования языковой, коммуникативной и страноведческой компетенций итальянских учащихся;

внедрены новые мультимедийные учебные ресурсы в процесс обучения студентов-политологов. Обобщены основные результаты исследования, которые показали положительные аспекты и недостатки организации курса дистанционного обучения, а также дальнейшие перспективы его совершенствования.

Ключевые слова: русский язык как иностранный, дистанционное обучение, информационные технологии, обучающая платформа, оболочка Moodle, мультимедийность, электронные ресурсы, система видеосвязи

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