Prospects of Russian as a Foreign Language Online Learning in Russian Universities

Elena N. Strelchuk

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University),
6 Miklukho-Maklaya St, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation
✉ Strelchukl@mail.ru

Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has made significant changes in the educational process in almost all countries of the world. The methods and approaches, techniques and technology that teachers used in offline learning, turned out to be ineffective. The issues related to online teaching of Russian as a foreign language have become particularly relevant, since many students had to leave Russia and study the language only online. The purpose of the study is to consider the prospects (immediate and long-term) of the Russian language online teaching to foreign students in Russian universities. The research materials are the results of a survey conducted among the 1st year master degree students, specialty 45.04.01 "Russian as a Foreign Language" of the Faculty of Philology of the RUDN University (Moscow), as well as the experience of the author, who teaches Russian to foreign students online on the TEIS (Telecommunication Educational and Informational System) and Microsoft Teams platforms. The study revealed the pros and cons of online learning of Russian as a foreign language, and showed the ways of improving its effectiveness in Russian universities. As a result of the conducted research, the immediate prospects are identified, which include the implementation of relevant components of pedagogical tools in Russian as a foreign language online learning: modern pedagogical technologies, the principles of individualization and differentiation, and the communicative approach. The long-term prospects concern teaching Russian to foreign students only in a mixed format. The formation of communicative competence, the lack of Russian-speaking environment, difficulties in organising control and developing students' writing skills are among the main problems that undermine the quality of teaching Russian as a foreign language online. It is concluded that in the future we should expect the implementation of a new approach in the world education system, since the pandemic will certainly affect the market of educational services all over the world.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Russian as a foreign language, foreign students, online learning, blended learning, online learning prospects

Introduction

Teaching Russian as a foreign language (hereinafter – RFL) has a long tradition. By the present, the methodology of teaching RFL has extensive experience, which is reflected in both theoretical and practical works. However, the beginning of 2020 made significant changes in the educational process in all countries of the world, including Russia. Students had to adapt to completely different educational conditions, the conditions, that they had not previously encountered – distance and online learning. It forced teachers to revise the approaches, principles and methods of teaching, and use modern educational resources.

It should be noted that the first attempts to organize distance learning were undertaken in the 18th century in Great Britain by Caleb Philips, who developed a method of teaching writing with the use of postal services. The rapid development of industrialization, printing and publishing, and the emergence of television and radio subsequently contributed to the progress of distance learning. It has become popular in many countries around the world (USA, Australia, Canada, France, China, Russia, etc.).

In the 21st century, with the development of computer technology, online learning has gained popularity. The number of students who choose Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in language learning is increasing every year: "In 2018, it reached over 101 million people" (Dhawal, 2018). Online lessons in Russian as a foreign language are attended by many foreigners who want to learn the language, but do not have the opportunity to do it offline.

In this regard, terms that have become in demand in the past few years appeared in methodology of teaching RFL. Let us name some of them related to the topic of our research. Thus, the online lesson is considered "the main organizational unit of the online educational process", "an independent linguodidactic definition of the modern digital educational space" and one of the forms of distance learning, which involves the direct communication of the teacher and student in real time through IP telephony technology. As a result, the concepts of "distance learning" and "online learning" are different and are not synonymous (Dyakova, Khvorova, 2020: 216). We should also focus on "synchronous learning" and "asynchronous learning". A.A. Zankova proposed a classification of online courses (resources), "based on the position of organizing training with the help of a teacher (in a synchronous or asynchronous communication mode) or without his participation" (Zankova, 2019: 28). In our research, we will use the concept of "online learning".

It should be noted that there are many scientific and methodological research papers devoted to educational resources, electronic textbooks and various simulators that were used during distance and online teaching of Russian as a foreign language both before and during the pandemic: E.G. Azimov (2012, 2020), V.A. Zhiltsov (2019), S.A. Pashkovskaya (2010), O.I. Rudenko-Morgun (2009), E.N. Strelchuk (Strelchuk, Ermolaeva, 2019), Zhang Wei, L.E. Vesnina (2020) and many others.

Despite the increased interest in modern educational resources in the field of RFL, it should be said that during the pandemic, most of the higher educational institutions of the Russian Federation were not ready to move to massive online education. Those institutions that organized such training as the only one possible in difficult social conditions faced a number of problems.

The aim

This study considers the prospects (near-term and further) of online education in RFL, which became the main aim of the study. By near-term prospects, we mean the organization of online education in the context of the pandemic until it ends. Further prospects include the organization of online training in the future, not under the emergency conditions.

Methods

The author used the following methods: complex theoretical analysis (analysis of scientific and methodical literature); observation (monitoring the process of teaching foreigners the Russian language online); referential and diagnostic method (conversations with teachers working with foreign students, questionnaires of recipients).

The recipients were first-year master students of the program 45.04.01 "Russian as a Foreign Language" of the philological faculty of the RUDN University (Moscow). A total of 30 people aged 21 to 50 years. Ethnic composition: 45% – foreigners (Serbia, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam, Greece, India, Ukraine, Moldova); 55% are Russians. 80% of the recipients had pedagogical experience of working in different linguocultural audiences (Russian as a non-native language and Russian as a foreign language). The choice of the designated recipients is not accidental. On the one hand, these are students who study online, on the other hand, they are RFL teachers with a certain pedagogical experience. They were asked to highlight the pros and cons of online education and, on based on the results, determine the prospects for this form of teaching in Russian universities. To do this, it was necessary to make suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of online teaching of Russian as a foreign language. The recipients considered online teaching Russian taken as a whole, without focusing on its individual stages (initial, basic and advanced), the contingent of students, age and learning objectives.

The study is also based on the experience of the author, who since March, 2020, has been teaching Russian as a foreign language at the Faculty of Philology of the RUDN University in real time on the TUIS platform (information and educational environment based on the open software MOODLE, which contains e-learning resources for all educational programs and related disciplines; supports the educational process and students' individual work on all educational subjects and regardless of their location) and the Microsoft Teams platform (a corporate platform that incorporates chats, meetings in a workspace).

Results

As a result of the study, the near-term and future prospects of online teaching Russian to foreigners in Russian universities were considered.

Near-term prospects suggest an emphasis on implementing the following components of pedagogical tools in the classroom in the process of online teaching RFL: various modern pedagogical technologies, principles of individualization and differentiation, communicative teaching method.

Further prospects involve teaching Russian to foreigners only in a mixed format. Among the main problems that influence high-quality teaching of RFL online, the author named the difficulties in formation of communicative competence, the lack of a Russian-speaking environment, the organization of control, difficulties in the development of students' writing skills.

Discussion

Teaching RFL online has divided teachers into two categories: some are totally against online teaching; the others point to the benefits of a new type of education (this is another hot topic in the era of the pandemic that requires special research): "Recently, it was difficult to imagine that it is possible to learn a foreign language without leaving your home or in any convenient place", but the pandemic has changed the worldview of millions of people (Zankova, 2019: 28).

It should be noted that the recipients also expressed different points of view. Thus, the results of the survey revealed the following:

– 4 people for online teaching,

– 14 people voted against online teaching

– 12 people evaluated online teaching fifty-fifty.

A total of 85 arguments were presented, of which: for – 30, against – 55.

The pros and cons of online learning highlighted by the recipients are shown in Figures 1–3.

The opportunity to study RFL online allows students, from anywhere in the world, to combine training with other activities, find materials in the public domain and learn the language using direct teaching methods (audio-visual and audiolingual). For students of the rational-logical type (Vietnamese, Chinese, Mongols, etc.), online learning also helps to remove the communication barrier when communicating with the teacher and classmates.

There are much more cons. They are associated both with a decline in the quality of education in general (18%) and with specific facts that reveal the problems of online education in RFL. So, the lack of communication, communication in the Russian-speaking environment is indicated by 30% of the respondents. Another 12% pay attention to a dramatic drop of motivation, unwillingness to learn online. 10% of participants are dissatisfied with the poor organization of control on electronic platforms, 5% of recipients note too much independent work. The remaining 25% highlight methodological problems: the lack of principles of

individualization and differentiation, difficulties in perceiving new language material, the formation and development of writing skills.
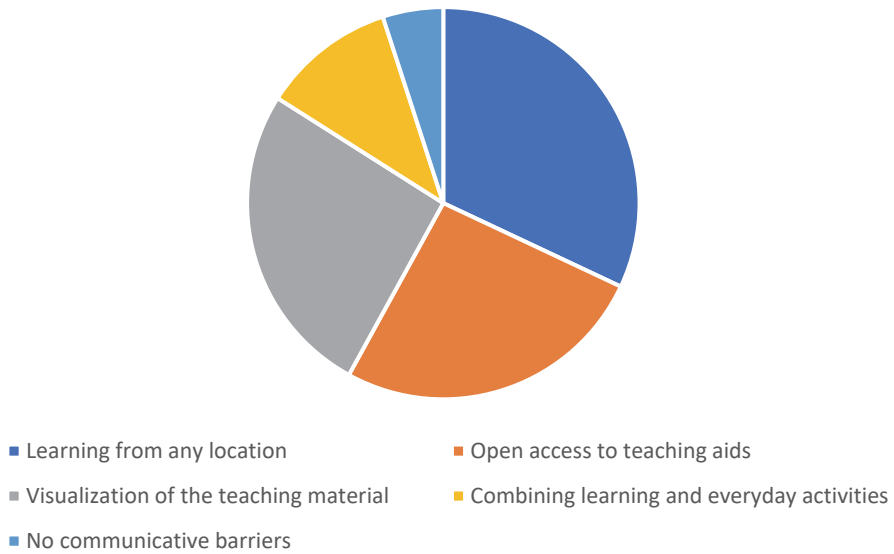

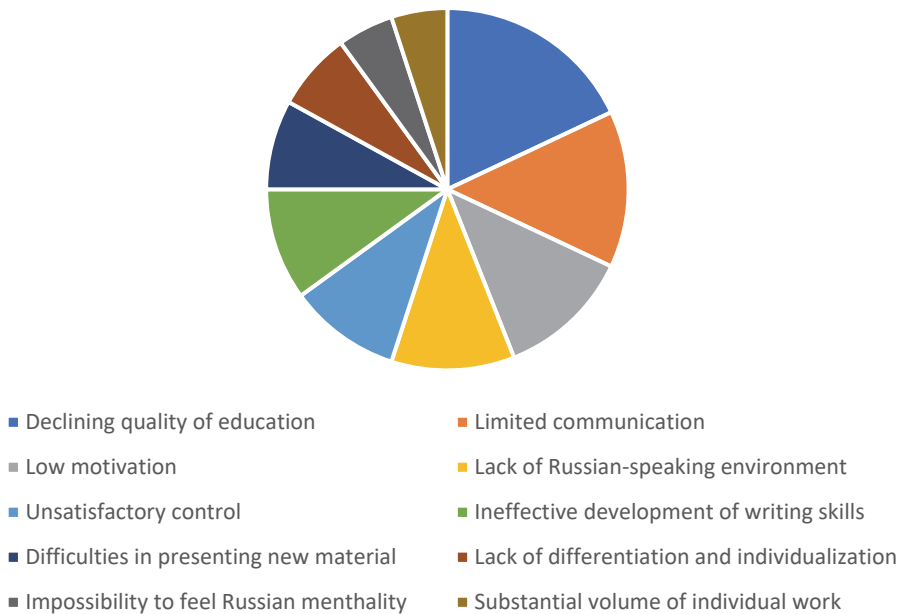**Figure 1.** Pros of online teaching RFL

- Learning from any location
- Open access to teaching aids
- Visualization of the teaching material
- Combining learning and everyday activities
- No communicative barriers

Figure 2. Cons of online teaching RFL

- Declining quality of education
- Limited communication
- Low motivation
- Lack of Russian-speaking environment
- Unsatisfactory control
- Ineffective development of writing skills
- Difficulties in presenting new material
- Lack of differentiation and individualization
- Impossibility to feel Russian menthality
- Substantial volume of individual work

Despite the large number of disadvantages in online teaching of RFL, currently one significant problem arises: "How to build the online learning process so that it becomes more effective?" If the online form of organizing the educational process has become relevant during the pandemic, then perhaps it will occupy its

niche in the educational process as one of possible and even the only available in difficult social situations. To answer this question, one should recall the words of the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle: "I teach by teaching." Currently, both students and teachers have to work under difficult educational conditions.

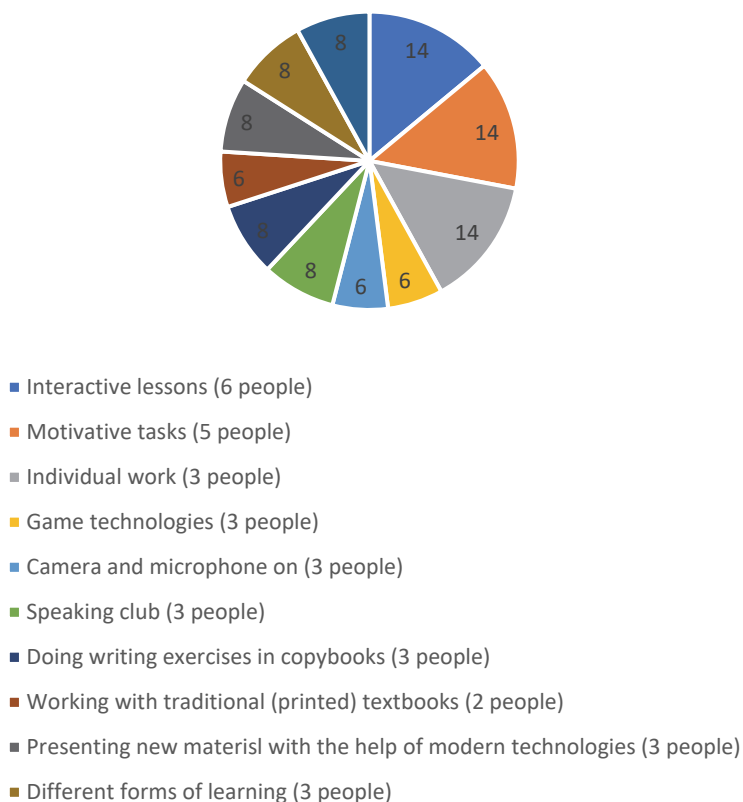Recipients made recommendations to improve online training in RFL (Figure 3).

- Interactive lessons (6 people)
- Motivative tasks (5 people)
- Individual work (3 people)
- Game technologies (3 people)
- Camera and microphone on (3 people)
- Speaking club (3 people)
- Doing writing exercises in copybooks (3 people)
- Working with traditional (printed) textbooks (2 people)
- Presenting new materisl with the help of modern technologies (3 people)
- Different forms of learning (3 people)

Figure 3. Recommendations to improve online training in RFL

There are a lot of recommendations made by the recipients, and they are of different nature. In the proposed study, we will focus on the most relevant of them.

Thus, the analysis of the pros and cons of online education and the recipients' recommendations, as well as the author's own teaching experience in a foreign audience, made it possible to identify the following components of the pedagogical toolkit ("a set of tools that are necessary for a teacher in the process of teaching and education, i. e. his professional activities") in online teaching of RFL, which is advisable to use in the ***short term*** (Strelchuk, 2019: 19).

1. *Modern pedagogical technologies*. There are many different educational technologies. Most of them are focused on computer support, since "the digital format allows unprecedented freedom and diversity in including materials into the educational process..." (Akishina, Tryapelnikov, 2018: 12). So it is advisable

to use in online learning those modern technologies that allow to motivate students to learn RFL. First of all, these are technologies of collaboration, projects, critical thinking and many others. These technologies involve presentations, which allow to diversify online lessons with the help of visualization, contribute to the development of skills of independent search for information on the Internet, as well as the ability to speak and communicate online.

Positive results gave virtual excursions (excursion is one of the main pedagogical technologies, according to A.N. Shchukin), aimed at developing a number of competencies (speech, sociolinguistic, socio-cultural, discursive, etc.) that are part of the communicative competence (Shchukin, 2012: 324–325). "Virtual excursions seem to be effective, since they are based on the principle of dialogueness and are implemented in the communicatively meaningful triad " teacher – student – museum items", they develop students' motivation to learn Russian, expands the foreign students' assimilation of the Russian-language picture of the world (Dudin, 2017: 23).

We also ought to mention such technology as gaming. Now it is associated with the term "gamification" and the use of computer games in the educational process. Currently, electronic applications have been developed that present information in a playful way. For example, created by the staff of the Pushkin Russian Language Institute "The Adventures of Smartcot" (Osadchii et al., 2018). From our point of view, they can be used at RFL lessons, first of all, as homework or independent work. However, not only computer games, but also other game forms that are traditionally used in teaching RFL should be used at online lessons. For example, role-playing business and situational games. It should be noted that presenting the material in a playful form should be controlled, since the excessive use of such technologies can turn a lesson into entertainment and deprive it of implementing necessary educational and methodological tasks.

2. *General didactic principles of individualization and differentiation*. These well-known principles are of great importance, since the whole process of teaching RFL is aimed at forming a foreign language personality of each student. However, the transition to mass distance and online education during the pandemic did not allow to fully implement these principles in the classroom with foreign students. This led to a number of shortcomings in educational process, including low attendance, lack of attention in the classroom, psychological tension, long-term adaptation to new online technologies and, as a result, low motivation of learning the target language. In our opinion, the principles of individualization and differentiation must be implemented both in extracurricular and classroom work of online RFL teaching. The teacher, taking into account these principles, should think over tasks and exercises for each student in accordance with his abilities and capabilities. In this regard, as A.A. Zankov noted, one should focus on "andragogy and flexibility of learning" (Zankova, 2019: 28). Language andragogy (Adult Learning Theory) involves taking into account certain methods, technologies and techniques that allow organizing the process of teaching RFL considering

"specificity of age-related characteristics of forming language competence in adults" (Milrud, 2014). Methodology of teaching RFL should also take into account the national characteristics of students. "An adult learner is characterized by psycho-age and ethnic characteristics that distinguish him from other groups of students, which must be taken into account in online classes" (Kozdra, 2019). For example, Chinese students like to prepare projects, search for material on the Internet, read it (read, but not tell; in an online learning environment, it is acceptable for Chinese students). Arab students prefer to take part in discussions, turn on cameras, microphones and justify their point of view. European students behave modestly but confidently in online classes. They not only do their homework well, but also help other students.

3. *Communicative method*. During online learning, preference should be given to the communicative method, where "the learning process is a model of the communication process" (Kapitonova et al., 2009: 160). In our opinion, implementing this method online creates interactivity as one of the most significant concepts of the modern educational process. In this connection, such terms as "interactive forms of learning", "interactive lessons", "interactive tasks" have appeared. Interactive means cooperating, taking an active part in the dialogue with both the teacher and the students. The foreground is "the personality of the student, while the main task of the teacher is not to give ready-made tasks, but to encourage students to actively search, actively solve problems" (Semenchukov, 2019: 88). The purposeful use of interactive forms, lessons and tasks is aimed at developing the clip consciousness of the modern generation Z. "Our students... perceive information not holistically, but as a sequence of almost unrelated events: through short stories, video clips, vivid pictures, emotional images, small articles" (Naumenko, 2020: 138). Therefore, it is necessary to present material online in a concise and vivid manner, avoiding visual fatigue of students, but at the same time make it understandable and accessible. The ease of presentation makes the material more interesting. From this point of view, various communication forums, which are aimed at developing the communicative competence of students, are really effective, however, working with them takes up a significant part of the study time, and the teacher cannot always use forums as a necessary pedagogical tool.

Further prospects for online teaching RFL should solve a number of topical issues. Let us consider only some of them in the framework of this study.

Formation of communicative competence. The main goal of teaching Russian to foreigners is to form their communicative competence in different spheres and situations of communication. Teachers should use various elements of pedagogical tools that are aimed at forming and developing this competence. It should be noted that online education deprives teachers and students of the opportunity to communicate "face to face", besides, it is also limited in time: after turning off the camera and microphone, the lesson ends (for comparison: in the offline format it continues during breaks and even after lessons). This problem should be solved with the help

of open discussion platforms and conversation clubs, which could maximize the involvement of students in the process of communication in the target language. However, organizing and implementing them online is not an easy task, especially at the initial stage, when students have a minimum of vocabulary. As a result, during online learning, communication in Russian is limited in time, which interfere with the formation and development of communicative competence.

Lack of a Russian-speaking environment. The second topical issue is the availability of the language environment. Most foreigners come to Russia with the main goal: to learn Russian in a linguistic environment as a "linguocultural given" (Orekhova, 2004: 387). It is the environment that allows to immerse in the world of the Russian language and Russian culture, to learn the Russian mentality. Of course, many students study Russian in their homeland, where there is no Russian-speaking environment. However, everyone has a desire to come to Russia, and everyone tries to realize it. During the pandemic, many foreigners left Russia and thereby deprived themselves of learning the Russian language in an environment where there is "natural reliable video and audio sequence", "situational and background sequence", "teaching environment of the language" (Orekhova, 2004: 387). Communicating with the teacher as a native Russian speaker in online classes, foreigners were involved only in educational, scientific and socio-cultural spheres, since most of the material studied is devoted to them. Social, formal and business spheres remained unclaimed, in which communication is most often carried out not in the classroom, but outside the university.

Homework supervision. In the online format, it is impossible to qualitatively control the task implementation. Free access to the Internet, artificial intelligence allow students to quickly find answers, offer solutions to which they have not a direct, but an indirect relationship (classmates provide assistance, they send ready-made answers to foreigners). Control in the form of tests, which is most often used during online classes, cannot be the main one. Not all types of speech activity and aspects of language can be effectively checked with their help. For example, speaking as a productive type of speech activity requires creating a large number of other test and control materials. Homework and how well it is done are very difficult issues. What resources are more effective? How do you monitor each student? These questions have not been answered yet.

Formation writing skills and abilities. Online formation of writing skills and abilities is complex and lengthy. Despite the fact that students have access to almost all the necessary written sources, learning to write in Russian and express thoughts in written form is considered one of the most difficult types of speech activities. Difficulties appear at the very early stage of learning, when students learn Russian sounds and letters. The teacher can use special online whiteboards, but he is not able to edit the spelling of letters in each student's notebook. Moreover, many students prefer to learn the Russian alphabet using a computer keyboard. Thus, their brains do not create cognitive memory maps, since the letters typed on the keyboard are not fixed in memory. "The hand is an extension of our

brain. Everything is interconnected. The hand from the brain, the brain from the hand" (Chernigovskaya, 2017: 19). There arises a problem of developing writing skills, as students get used to numerous computer resources and just write off ready-made texts. Why do the students need to develop their speech in Russian if there is such a good helper – the Internet? We think that almost all students belonging to Generation Z ask themselves this question.

The outlined topical issues show that it is rather difficult to achieve maximum efficiency in online teaching of RFL. It should be assumed that teaching RFL should be carried out in a mixed (blended) format, when a part of the classes is carried out online (provided that there are no technical problems: uninterrupted operation of the Internet, a high-quality information platform, communicative literacy of a teacher and a student), the other part – offline, with direct face-to-face contact between a teacher and a student.

Ideas about implementing this format were put forward by foreign scientists Pete Sharma, Curtis Bonk, Barney Barett, Martin Oliver. They called this form of learning "hybrid" (Friesen, 2012). Both terms are currently used, although, from our point of view, blended learning is more often used in Russian pedagogy. Among Russian scientists the concept of "blended learning" is proposed by I.Yu. Mishota: This is a "combined course" that "...combines real-time e-learning programs and teacher-student classroom lessons" (Mishota, 2012: 443).

It should be noted that at present, projects have been proposed for studying foreign languages in the blended format. They are mainly devoted to the study of English in different countries of the world. For example, in Russia (Ivanova et al., 2020; Ostapenko, 2017), China (Dou, Song, 2020), USA (Payne, 2020), South Korea and Saudi Arabia (Bailey et al., 2020). So far, there are no relevant studies that would consider the format of blended teaching RFL, which indicates the prospects of the direction we have indicated.

Conclusion

Quintilian's words "Practice without theory is more relevant, than theory without practice" are still topical. Rough social conditions made Russian teachers massively carry out the process of online teaching Russian as a foreign language at a practical level without fundamentsl theoretical base. In our research, we pointed out only some actual problems of online teaching RFL in the short and long term. Mixed format of online teaching foreign students is considered as one of the variants. This author's point of view could be criticized. We suppose that in the nearest future world education will produce a new teaching approach, as the pandemic will leave its mark and influence world education market.

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Bio note:

Elena N. Strelchuk, Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor of the Department of the Russian Language and Teaching Methods of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University). *Research interests:* methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language, culture of Russian speech, applied cultural linguistics. Author of more than 150 scientific publications. E-mail: Strelchukl@mail.ru.

Научная статья

Перспективы онлайн-обучения русскому языку как иностранному в вузах РФ

Е.Н. Стрельчук

*Российский университет дружбы народов,
Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6*
✉ Strelchukl@mail.ru

Аннотация. Пандемия COVID-19 внесла значительные коррективы в образовательный процесс почти во всех странах мира. Методы и подходы, приемы и технологии, которыми преподаватели пользовались в офлайн-обучении, оказались неэффективными. Особую актуальность приобрели вопросы, связанные с онлайн-обучением русскому языку как иностранному, так как многие студенты вынуждены были покинуть Россию и изучать язык только в онлайновом формате. Цель исследования заключается в рассмотрении перспектив (ближайших и дальнейших) онлайн-обучения русскому языку иностранцев в вузах РФ. Материалами исследования послужили результаты анкетирования, проведенного среди магистрантов 1-го года обучения по направлению 45.04.01 «Русский язык как иностранный» филологического факультета РУДН (г. Москва), а также опыт работы автора, который преподает русский язык иностранцам в режиме онлайн на платформах ТУИС и Microsoft Teams. В результате исследования выявлены плюсы и минусы онлайн-обучения русскому языку как иностранному, внесены предложения по повышению его эффективности в российских вузах, определены ближайшие перспективы, которые предполагают реализацию актуальных компонентов педагогического инструментария в онлайн-обучении РКИ: современных педагогических технологий, принципов индивидуализации и дифференциации, коммуникативного метода обучения. К дальнейшим перспективам отнесено обучение русскому языку иностранцев только в смешанном формате. Основные проблемы, препятствующие качественному обучению РКИ в режиме онлайн, лежат в области формирования коммуникативной компетенции,

отсутствия русскоязычной среды, организации контроля, трудностей в развитии навыков письменной речи учащихся. В перспективе следует ожидать реализацию нового подхода в системе мирового образования, поскольку пандемия не пройдет бесследно, а повлияет на рынок образовательных услуг во всех странах мира.