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## **Modern Approaches to Spanish Language Teaching, Blended Learning**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Every language is a living organism and cannot be taught through the application of only theoretical or practical tools. Therefore, the integration of modern approaches in foreign language instruction takes on a particular importance.*

*Along with the development of online technologies, modern foreign language classes are gradually undergoing changes and modifications. Introduction of online learning is one of such significant changes. There are various forms of online learning, including blended (online) learning, which represents a synthesis of classroom and online education.*

*The present work sets forth the priorities of blended learning, which distinguish the blended approach from other methods of foreign language instruction. The work also includes the results of the student survey conducted to find out whether the Spanish language students actively use online means, in addition to classroom learning and how they view the idea of putting the blended learning model in place.*

*Key words: Modern approaches to Spanish language teaching, blended learning model, research*

The new objectives of foreign language instruction as determined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages have given rise to a series of fundamental changes in foreign language teaching methods. While the European Framework of Reference does not give priority to any teaching method, communicative approach appears to become a key method for achieving the Document-stipulated language competences for a large majority of specialists.

Some scientists refer to the current period of foreign language instruction as the post-method era. However, it can definitely be argued, that the foreign language teaching landscape is now increasingly focused on communicative approaches, of which specialists single out the following:

Communicative language teaching, which modified the language teaching paradigm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its results still continue to have a

marked effect as it has left its impact on various approaches to language teaching.

Natural approach to language teaching, which is based on language learning theory developed by Stephen Krashen.

Cooperative language learning, which, though not designed immediately for language learning, is largely based on communicative goals of language instruction.

Content-based language teaching, and lastly, task-based language teaching, which serves communicative aims and can be regarded as the most up-to-date model of communicative approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

According to Jacobs and Farrel, Communicative language teaching (CLT) brought about eight major changes in the language teaching process. These changes plus communicative approaches identified by other authors may make up the following list:

- Open and flexible learning concept;
- Development of thinking skills. Language should be used for developing enquiring, critical and creative thinking skills;
- Focus on themes and content, contextualization of communication (linguistic pragmatics);
- Use of authentic language;
- Special attention is paid to the development of speaking skills;

- Integration of daily conversations (dialogues) in the teaching process; increasingly greater attention has recently been paid to the development of written speech and communicative competence in reading;
- Grammar as a means of achieving the goal;
- Use of literary texts;
- Achieving understanding progression that is aimed at active use of language;
- Language learner activation (learner-centred language teaching), creative use of language;
- Importance of providing parallel information, in particular, information on the situation in another country;
- Different social forms of teaching aimed at promoting interaction;
- Diversity of types of exercises;
- Introduction of new forms of evaluation different from the available traditional approaches;
- The teacher is regarded as a facilitator who tries to find various alternate ways of teaching;
- Individual approaches to teaching the language come to the forefront. The learner's needs and skills must be considered in the teaching process.

The change of these approaches has not led to the creation of any single model of communicative approaches to teaching the

language. Rather, it has contributed to the development of various teaching approaches that meet the aforesaid characteristics. While there is no single and commonly recognized model of syllabus, foreign language instruction documents outline the development of communicative competences in the following areas: language skills, training materials, grammar, vocabulary and linguistic functions.

Various forms of online teaching fill a prominent place on the list of modern approaches to foreign language instruction.

It has already been a few years that the use of advanced technologies is no longer a novelty in the developed countries. Students can make the learning process more effective and deepen their knowledge and insights in various areas. Modern curriculums allow them to tailor the learning process to their individual needs and skills that, for their part, expand teacher workload and responsibility. The curriculums must fully integrate activities that will be adapted to each learner's interests and abilities and will prompt students to take a fresh look at the information received and to adopt a creative outlook on the learning process. The way to identify future researchers and scientists, to activate passive students and to awaken a thirst for learning in them lies only through this approach. And it is hardly conceivable to achieve this goal without integrating advanced technologies into the course of lectures.

Many years of teaching experience has allowed us to formulate our viewpoints on various teaching methods and strategies, some of which are given below:

- A student having only an in-classroom experience of learning the language, can more or less practice his/her knowledge with a teacher who is equipped with modern methods; enjoys a writing competency but has a difficulty communicating with native Spanish speakers. The content of a textbook however modern differs from the authentic material provided by the Internet because the language is subject to constant change and development;
- A student learning a foreign language online does not have mastery of the rules of grammar, makes mistakes when speaking or writing but feels at ease when communicating with native Spanish speakers;
- A student who, through the use of online course specifically designed for him/her, effectively combines classroom learning with communication and information technologies, can better understand authentic material (materials that are read, heard and viewed), can easily handle writing tasks and communication in real situations, is free from fear of expressing his/her opinion

publicly or from the anxiety of making mistakes when speaking. The teacher control, in the meantime, ensures him/her against ambiguity and the possibility of learning something the wrong way.

The latter method has gained wide currency in various countries and is referred to as blended learning.

### **What is blended learning?**

With the development of online technologies, modern foreign language lesson is gradually undergoing changes. One of such important changes is the emergence of online learning. There are currently various forms of online learning, blended learning also among them.

Blended learning is a synthesis of classroom-based practice and online learning experience, where the choice of training materials and control falls within the scope of the teacher's competence.

### **Two classrooms**

Blended learning gives the teachers and students two tools for conducting a learning process – physical environment (traditional place-based classroom) and virtual space (online course)

### **Traditional classroom characteristics:**

Lesson takes place in real time, a teacher can immediately answer students' questions, put right their mistakes and keep their attention focused. Students can have face-to-face contact, discussions and interactions. Teacher acts as a facilitator for students' involvement and interpersonal skills, observing the learning activities and collaboration process. However, learning activities in classroom environment may become chaotic and create problems even for the most diligent student as the lack of time often prevents a teacher from working closely with small groups or individual students.

### **Virtual Classroom Characteristics**

Virtual classroom allows students to choose the most convenient time to fulfil their tasks: read theory, do various tests and exercises, listen to audio texts, watch videos, etc. Despite many advantages, however, online setting, is marked by the lack of face-to-face physical interaction, and very few opportunities for the development of interpersonal skills. Knowledge acquired in such environment is not always complete.

Blended learning is therefore ideal for learning any discipline - and in this case - the Spanish language, as it represents a synthesis of modern learning theories.

### **Advantages of blended learning:**

- **Credible materials**
- **Access to authentic materials**
- **Better time management**
- **Online reading of theory**
- **Enhancement of student creativity**
- **Development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills**
- **Paper use reduction**
- **All training resources in a single location**
- **Student self-assessment**
- **Development of reading competence**
- **Less tiring grammar exercises**

There are various models of blended learning, which should be used in line with teacher and student interests and training goals.

Flipped classroom is one of such models.

### **Flipped Classroom**

Flipped classroom is one of the forms of blended learning. Using this method, students read theory at home. When they come to class meetings, all classroom discussions, practical exercises and detailed explanation of content are centered on the teacher, who controls the flow of the lesson.

In the traditional model of instruction, students are introduced to theory in the classroom while the time at home is used for

practical exercises. A flipped classroom reverses the traditional learning environment. As a result, flipped classroom students are more well-prepared for practical exercises, which leads to a more effective use of class time. Using this model, the teacher needs to lecture less and focus more on individual needs of each student.

The superiority of the method is that the teacher participates himself/herself in the learning process and offers students a variety of learning methods and strategies. As a result, lectures become lively, inspiring, interesting and creative, and they can give deeper insights not only to students but also to teachers as any viewpoint or suggestion put forward by students may act as a trigger for new discoveries. Besides, flipped classroom gives boost to critical thinking. Watching a video for learning purposes is a lower cognitive process that does not require any critical thinking whereas using in practice the learned material is a higher cognitive process that calls for problem solution skills and is implemented in the classroom with the participation of the teacher who directs the instruction process and gives students the roadmap to follow.

This instruction method is very effective. However, most teachers do not use it as a unique method. Rather, they employ it in combination with other models, based on the complexity of training material, learning level, training period and student interests.

## **Assessment**

Correctly implemented assessment is a kind of bridge between teaching and learning and serves two goals: reflecting student progress and improving teaching quality.

How can the time-constrained teacher having to deal with large numbers of students give regular and quality assessment to each of them?

This problem can be solved by electronic training course, which can be used not only for assessing students, but also for tracking student progress at any time.

Setting clear learning purposes from the very outset of the learning process is an essential prerequisite for ensuring full and objective assessment. It is equally important for both: students and teachers.

By regularly assessing students, the teacher can easily determine which parts of the learning content are difficult for students to understand and need to be repeated or further clarified with the use of other methods. On completion of the semester, the teacher can analyze his/her own observations and the student performance and decide which teaching methods were successful and which – were not. This will help the teacher start planning for the next semester with greater accent on the aspects, which students found difficult to deal with during the previous semester.

Multiple and regular assessment, in the meantime, allows students to take stock of the

progress, rectify the problems and earn the best final assessment.

Using the traditional assessment method, the teacher corrects and assesses students' written works and then hands them back to students with necessary notes. This explains why at the end of the academic year teachers have only a general, and not rarely, biased picture of students' academic progress. Online assessment, in the meantime, is archived in each student's portfolio and gives the teacher maximum information on each student's performance.

Another advantage of online assessment is objectiveness. Classroom environment discourages some learners' self-expression affecting those who have the difficulty of expressing their ideas publicly or simply need more time for analysis and for arriving at definite conclusions. Such students may excel themselves in fulfilling online tasks.

## **Survey**

The survey was conducted with the participation of Tbilisi State University students learning Spanish as a faculty discipline.

The survey involved three groups consisting of 10-15 students with A1 Spanish level. Pre-testing was conducted to ensure that all the three groups are made up of learners with comparable skills and language proficiency.

**Survey duration** – 1 semester.

**Survey hypothesis** – The most effective method of Spanish language instruction is the teacher-guided use of communication and information technologies.

**Survey Objective** – Identifying pros and cons of various methods of Spanish language instruction.

**Four methods of academic survey were employed** – **experiment, observation, progress test and interview.**

Experiment consisted in teaching the same material to each group through the use of various methods. It consisted of three stages:

**First stage:**

- The teacher used nearly all modern in-class methods with the first group.
- Students of the second group, in addition to classroom practice, were offered an intensive e-learning course largely controlled by the teacher.
- Learners of the third group took a web-based training course and other online sources.

**Second stage:**

- Observing the experiment and making written notes.

- Formulating conclusions based on the information received.

**Third Stage:**

- Progress test (using the post-testing, all the three focus groups were given the same assignment);
- Comparing the post-testing results of the focus groups,
- Interviewing group members to assess the Spanish language teaching tools used and the learning environment.

**The survey findings** have proved the assumption that the most effective method of Spanish language instruction is blended learning - the use of teacher-controlled e-learning course in combination with classroom practice.

A survey was conducted at the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University to find out how students approach blended learning and the use of e-learning course in addition to classroom learning.

**Survey method:** Qualitative research and analysis of secondary data were used as methods for drawing up a questionnaire.

Oral interview has revealed that a large majority of students positively appraise blended learning. The main problem facing the students is a curriculum overload. Despite their

zeal for learning Spanish, they often have to skip lectures. E-learning course can help them catch up with the missed classes.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the survey and the experience of other countries provide evidence that the blended learning of Spanish (and also of other foreign languages) has a superiority over the well-known learning methods already in use in Georgia. Blended learning is fitted to meet the needs of teachers and students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and brings together all existing learning methods. This method makes the lecture much more interactive and interesting and is oriented towards solution of real problems. In a blended learning environment, students are half-prepared for the lecture and expect concrete answers to concrete questions. Having thought out well the problems of each student, the teacher can also provide a better planning for the lesson. It should also be noted that many teachers fear modern technologies thinking that they can never master required skills. Their fear is quite natural as it is not easy

for everyone to keep abreast of advanced technologies. In contrast, students and young people, in general, are more enthusiastic about any novelty, which they can easily put to their benefit. The goal of teaching, in the final analysis, is nothing but the teaching method tailored to the skills and interests of learners. If the teacher takes into account students' desires, the result will be just unbelievable in terms of student performance and learning interest.

Besides, to spark teachers' interest in blended learning methods, it is necessary that all educational institutions provide teachers with specific training courses, acquaint them with the ways of using e-training courses, give them insights into the advantages of similar teaching tools already in wide use in other countries and help interested teachers successfully integrate such tools in classroom teaching. The teacher's intention to change and diversify teaching methods will impact on the mood of learners and kindle their interest and enthusiasm for learning – a natural urge for a human being.

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