



MODERN TRENDS IN USING VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT: The current article looks back to historical grounds of using virtual learning environments in education, and specifically in teaching foreign languages. The author also examines several definitions of the term VLE by researchers, methodologists, and finally comes up with one single multiple sided definition of the concept. The article further focuses on various methods and approaches in implementing VLEs in foreign language teaching from the perspective of language teaching methodology. Examples are given to support particular techniques to implement diverse VLEs in practice of teaching foreign languages.

Keywords: Virtual learning environment (VLE), platforms, network, graphic design, interface, user-friendly interface, Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, MOOCs, online learning, distant education, virtual reality (VR)

INTRODUCTION

As the executive director of the Curriculum Mapping Institute, author and educator Heidi Hayes Jacobs stated: "Training developers need to integrate technology seamlessly into the curriculum instead of viewing it as an add-on, an after-thought, or an event". In modern society, the role of information technologies is continuously increasing; they penetrate deeper into the main spheres of people's lives. They have the main influence on the processes of modernization and globalization in science, culture, and especially in education. Basically, a new cultural space is formed thanks to the media and their development. Currently, there is a continuous interaction and interpenetration of different cultures, regions and countries. In this regard, there is an interest in the problems of the role and place of interethnic dialogue in the formation of the cultural space, where the main role is primarily played by the Internet.

As for the English language, it was not so long ago that it was a simple subject in the schedule, but in the conditions of modern globalization, it has become an integral part of



life. It is used in business, sports, politics, the Internet, etc. It is also viewed as a means of introducing science and education in various regions of the world.

The very history of virtual learning environments dates back to late 18th and early 19th century, when first advertisements and announcements of educationalists and teachers were advising to send their teaching materials to those who were studying remotely. The chronological development of this notion as a technique and approach in teaching took different titles and forms throughout the history of education, and specifically teaching foreign languages in general. There are particular mentions of virtual learning environment used in higher education in newspaper articles, in formal governmental announcements, in scholarly papers and theses, and in new discovery journals, because new inventions were coming to use in this approach such as CATO (compiler for automatic teaching operations), PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations), Sketchpad – graphical user interface for a computer, various authoring and programming languages for PLATO system, “KiddiKomputer” programmed to use the Smalltalk language, and so on.

The first field trials of so called CMC on its applicability to the Virtual classroom took place in the 1980s. Following this, there were vast amount of studies and experiments done in the field throughout the years. Different universities all over the world started to come up with their own online centers, online programs, distance education techniques, distance courses and various devices and technologies to support them. Newer and more modern networking systems were coming into education systems all over the world. Historical development and enhancement of virtual learning environments is closely connected with the development of operating systems such as Windows and Macintosh. Each year operating systems came up with newer and more interactive features, and this in turn meant those features would enhance the teaching opportunities, and educationalists and researchers would come up with a new network or a new program following up each upgrade of the operating systems in use at that time.

In the 1990s there was a boost of different companies offering their online learning environments to various educational institutions, and each had their own specific services to use by teachers and students. These companies launched various websites for supporting virtual learning environments: Blackboard Inc. founded by Michael Chasen in Washington DC (this LMS is now widely used in US higher education system), coursenotes.com by



University of Texas (2000), ePath learning – open source LMS, University of Cologne together with ILIAS team founded CampusSource initiative to promote open source learning management systems for teaching at Universities, Sloanspace open access system offered by MIT Sloan school, MOODLE (another open source LMS popularly used by higher education's systems around the world) was introduced (2001) and MOODLE 1.0 released (2002), Canvas K-12 was launched by Instructure (2012), and finally Google introduced Google classroom (2014).

Certainly, list of virtual learning environments and distance education tools and devices created and enhanced in this long period is much bigger that provided here. We tried to list the LMS that were and are still widely used in higher education systems, and which show considerable features of virtual learning as a whole.

Interactive communication or spoken interaction is increasingly being replaced by a virtual mode of contact. Virtualization of communication is understood as its direct implementation via the Internet. Its use allows you to transfer and save information in the form of products or outcomes of an activity. Researchers often point to this when they talk about the revival of the epistolary genre with the development of electronic correspondence.

The computer has greatly changed our understanding of the communication process, as well as the way we handle information. Therefore, communication through a computer can be distinguished as a special type of communication. The main correlate of this type of communication is computer or electronic discourse, as one of the forms of virtual discourse.

As indicated by T.Yu. Bazarov [9, p. 12], in a virtual environment a new type of communication is being formed, which differs from interpersonal and intercultural. Virtual communication is a type of electronic communication through the use of an online computer. Therefore, the sphere of virtual communication includes communication in social networks, forums, chats, blogs.

An important role in the formation of communicative competence is played by the creation of a virtual language environment in a foreign language lesson, which is one of the main problems of modern methods.



VLE defined

The term "virtual language environment" is "a set of Internet resources and means of communication, which is built on the basis of electronic textbooks and teaching aids that help to master various aspects of the language and form certain speech skills and abilities, as well as ensuring control over the level of their formation". [12]. This definition creates an idea of such an environment, as an artificial controlled cyberspace for language learners. The problem with such definition of a virtual environment is that, it lacks important aspects as "experience" and "use" which modern trends in teaching foreign languages are currently focusing on.

Hrastinski defined virtual learner participation as "a process of learning by taking part and maintaining relations with others". He claimed that this type of a learning process and learner participation is a set of actions including communicating, thinking, feeling and belonging simultaneously occurring online and offline. [Hrastinski 2008]

Oliwa came up with another definition of virtual environment that described the notion as "the one which highlights the relations between visual settings, their interaction, complement and concurrence". He concluded that such a phenomenon owes its development and progress to enhancing virtual technologies, augmented learning, rise of social networking, progress of semantic web and finally the launch of intelligent web technologies. [Oliwa 2020]

Other researchers such as Kluge and Riley (2008) describe virtual learning environments as "multi-user virtual environments" (MUVE) or Metaverse – a term they came up with to call and describe a virtual learning environment.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), in VLEs learners "interact with authentic, contextualized, linguistically challenging materials in a communicative and academic context". [Richards and Rodgers 2001] As we approach this term more closely, and specifically from the perspective of teaching foreign language context, we would feel closer to this very definition of the term VLE, as it comprises all the necessary components of our approach, especially putting huge emphasis on communication.

On the other hand, another researcher and methodologist Wastiau looked at the concept virtual learning environment from a different angle, and gave the following somewhat metaphorical definition: "It is an umbrella term that describes a broad range of



ICT systems used to deliver and support learning. As a minimum, we expect it to combine communication and collaboration tools, secure individual online working space, tools to enable teachers to manage and tailor content to user needs, pupil progress tracking, and anytime, anywhere access". [Wastiau 2010]. The most fundamental aspect of this definition is that it is in the broadest sense of the term, and exactly highlights its most outstanding features such as resourcefulness and accessibility.

When creating a "virtual language environment" in an English lesson, an immersion in the language takes place, the strength of which is consistency, scientific basis and unity. It is characterized by the following aspects: the age of the student who is taught according to this method; the time it takes to conduct a full-fledged training in the target language. The biggest figures in the field of foreign language teaching methodology who studied and analysed virtual learning environments were Lin&Lan (2015), Pedro (2019), Zawacki-Richter (2019), Mike (1996), WarschauerandMeskill (2000), Koller (2012), Deming (2015), Oliwa (2020) and several others who studied the same term from different field perspectives as well.

The modern stage of development of technology is characterized by the transition to automated training and the creation of multifunctional training complexes.

Information technologies, however, are being actively introduced into all spheres of human life, including education. They have a huge impact on the creation of new educational systems based on a student-centered approach. They are aimed at enhancing the independent activity of students.

New educational systems are built on the basis of a modular system for organizing training, which combines pedagogical and information and communication technologies, which implies close integration of full-time and distance learning.

Specialists refer to modern pedagogical technologies such methods and forms of teaching as brainstorming, virtual discussion, project activities, situational analysis, student's portfolio [13].

According to the researchers such as Lewis&Whitlock (2003), Krajka (2007), Arora (2013), Weller (2007), Stecyk (2008), Smyrnova-Trybulska and Stach (2012), Ryan (2014), Szerszen (2014) and several others in the field, the above technologies will be able to reveal



their potential only in specially created environments that facilitate the organization of distance learning for students in the subject.

These environments are a kind of platform containing various educational tools that facilitate the organization of interaction not only between close and constantly contacting subjects of the educational process, but even those that are separated by space and time.

According to Cambridge English dictionary, virtual learning environment is “a system for learning and teaching using the internet and special software” [2].

On the other hand, the glossary of terms created by student engagement platform in Canada – TopHat defines Virtual learning environment as “an online-based platform that offers students and professors digital solutions that enhance the learning experience. Unlike a virtual classroom, which is meant to replicate and replace the physical classroom environment for distance learners, a virtual learning environment (or VLE) harnesses technology to supplement an in-class experience, with, for example, digital communication, interaction and quizzes or polls that run through the VLE” [7].

Definition provided by TopHat outstands the Cambridge definition of VLE in the way it focuses on its different aspects, and more importantly, clearly emphasizes the distinction between a VLE and a virtual classroom – two diverse notions constantly being understood as the same thing.

There is a broader definition of VLE in JISC InfoNet system, which states “virtual learning environment is a collection of integrated tools enabling the management of online learning, providing a delivery mechanism, student tracking, assessment and access to resources” [4].

In this definition the authors attempt to point out the exact features of VLEs to be of great significance in education systems, i.e. student tracking and assessment. Their idea is that VLEs can provide educators and educational administrators with valuable time saving opportunity to assess and track student progress, and consequently save up real classroom time for other activities and tasks. There is another important aspect mentioned in the definition in which it highlights the students’ access to resources. In this digital era, students’ iPads, smart phones and tablets, laptops and other devices are their most important learning devices. Thus, granting them access to resources online, gives them a huge priority of stocking all the course resources in one place. In turn, it should be



highlighted here, that most VLEs have cloud spaces for storing resources, and students can log in and access the resources at once, which makes learning more effective, productive and more importantly, digital.

Kuksa and Childs (2014) describe claim that “virtual learning environments (VLEs) engage their users imaginatively, intellectually and interactively, giving them a wide range of choices with which to confront and manipulate historical information” [3].

We would agree with Kuksa and Childs’ definition or description of VLEs, in terms of interactivity and wide range of choice it provides students with. One of the objectives of the current research work is to prove that VLEs encourage and assist students to interact with the instructors and their peers for the purpose of achieving the desired level of communication and interactive competence.

Now after examining several interpretations of the term virtual learning environment, we can come round to our own definition of the notion considering our purpose of using it to teach foreign languages. Virtual learning environment can be defined as a usually an open source web-based platform, that gives students an opportunity to access resources, connect with the instructors or peers and submit any assignments related to a specific course. This kind of a leaning environment creates an efficient cyberspace, where everyone can feel convenient, and independent in one or other way.

Virtual learning environments – explained

When it comes to virtual learning environments, there is a huge dilemma among users on whether the tools are only Internet based, or otherwise. There is a vast variety of VLEs in all spheres of life, including Education, and there are virtual environments requiring a certain network connection and there are the ones that do not, and this requirement mostly depends on whether the course content is supposed to be synchronous or asynchronous. Some learning management systems may just require an intranet – a local or a restricted communications network within an institution or an organization. We happened to examine VLEs that are supported by certain software or computer programs that sometimes do and sometimes do not require a stabile internet connection. Some examples for software supporting various virtual learning environments that can be used in education would be *Absorb LMS*, *Tovuti*, *Cornerstone LMS*, *Docebo*, *360Learning*, etc. There are a lot more Internet-based VLEs examples for which could be the most popular ones such as *MOODLE*,



Canvas, Blackboard, Edmodo, Coursera, Padlet, most of the online course platforms and online degree programs, various webinars, etc.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it would be very narrow to conclude that VLEs are only internet-based platforms; however, the best and the most popular VLEs and LMS are the web-based ones and they outstand among non-Internet based VLEs with their interactive designs and user-friendly modern interfaces.

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