Tutor Support in the Process of Language Education Digitalization: A Case Study of University Distance Language Learning

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ABSTRACT
As information and communication technologies permeate all areas of life, including education, perceptions with respect to what students need to learn to succeed in a global information society are undergoing drastic changes. The educational environment is witnessing a transformation. A paradigm shift from a classical to a non-classical one, which focuses on personality identification, self-development and self-determination, is also observed. In accordance with the demands of the new society, the task of re-conceptualizing teachers’ professional activities and, in particular, active implementation of ideas of tutor support in the educational process is at the forefront. Tutor competence - the ability to manage educational process meaningfully, technically and methodically competently and effectively in the context of distance education is one of the essential professional qualities of a teacher of the 21st century. This article focuses on tutor support technology for students who study a foreign (English) language in an online course, which is a part of a distance professional retraining program. The author systematizes the characteristic features of tutor activities in the field of distance language learning and tutor support.

Keywords: Tutor, tutor support, distance language learning, digitalization of education

Introduction
Today, we are living in a highly digitalized world. As information and communication technologies penetrate all areas of life, including education, our understanding of what students need to learn to be successful in the global information society is changing. First, they must learn to navigate in large amounts of information, analyze it, make decisions, solve problems, master new areas of knowledge and engage in lifelong learning.

Currently, the educational environment is witnessing a transformation; the subject-subject relations between the educational process participants are being established. Within the new model framework, students are more responsible for their studies, engaged in an independent search for and creating new knowledge, sharing it with others, while teachers are no longer “translators of knowledge”. They become guides, mentors, instructors, tutors.

Nowadays, it is customary to talk about the transformation of the learning environment and the change of educational paradigms (Verbitsky, 2012). In the new non-classical paradigm, personality identification, its self-determination in modern conditions becomes a priority and, in connection with its relevance and novelty, requires special support.
Therefore, a new understanding of the essence of the teacher's professional activity comes to the fore, particularly active participation in implementing the ideas and tasks of tutoring - supporting the individual in their self-education, self-development, and self-determination in open education. Tutoring in distance professional education is considered in the works of N.V. Borisov, A.G. Chernjavskaj, Yu.L. Deranger, T.V. Lyutova, N.G. Miloradova, E.S. Polat, S.A. Schennikov, A.G. Teslinov (Schennikov et al., 2019). Certain aspects of the pedagogical activity of a tutor are reflected in the works of S.A. Schennikov, which contain a general description of tutor activities and reveal the theoretical foundations of tutoring as a special type of pedagogical activity. The ideas of tutor support are presented in the works of M. Yu. Cherdelina, I.V. Chikova, N.E. Erofeeva, E.I. Kobyschta, T.M. Kovaleva, G.A. Melekesov, S. Yu. Popova and A. A. Terov (Kovaleva et al., 2012; Erofeeva et al., 2015). Tutor competence - the ability to manage educational activities meaningfully, technically and methodically competently and effectively in the context of distance education - is one of the basic professional qualities of a 21st-century teacher. By tutor competence, we mean an integrative quality of a teacher's personality who possesses the knowledge of psychology and pedagogy, has skills of subject-subject interaction in society and can build a trajectory of the mentee's personal development (Erofeeva et al., 2015). An analysis of the state of the issue under discussion showed that, despite the available research, theoretical and practical aspects of tutor support aimed at helping students in determining the content of their own education, professional self-determination in the context of specialized training, its features, structure, organizational conditions are yet to be more thoroughly examined.

**Methodological Framework**

The article focuses on the model of tutor support for students of an online English course, which is a part of the distance professional retraining program “Theoretical and pragmatic foundations of teaching a foreign (English) language: modern approaches”. The program, designed by the staff of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University, under the guidance of Dr. Alla L. Nazarenko, professor and the head of the Department of Linguistics and Information Technologies, combines the best practices of Russian and foreign linguodidactics with modern approaches to teaching foreign languages, developed by the methodological school of LMSU. Since 2014, over 120 students have successfully completed the program. This program aims primarily at English teachers with no special pedagogical education and for all those wishing to receive professional retraining in the field of teaching English and the already obtained degree in a humanitarian or technical area, postgraduate students, and undergraduate student in senior courses. Its relevance is explained by the fact that Moscow and regional schools, due to the shortage of qualified English language teachers, have to offer such vacancies to graduates of non-linguistic universities who need methodological and linguistic support. The program is also addressed to everyone interested in teaching a foreign (English) language, considering the current state and requirements of methodology of teaching foreign languages and using ICT tools to increase the efficiency and interactivity of the educational process and to motivate students.

The target audience of the program has its own specifics, the consideration of which is necessary to understand the choice of distance learning as a form of instruction and tutor support as the leading teaching technology. Basically, the students are adults, most often with full-time professional employment, with training experience in educational organizations and who are aware of their needs and motives. The main motives of course applicants are:

- professional development,
- career prospects,
- education for expanding horizons,
- obtaining a diploma,
- communication needs.

Students in the distance learning system have many limitations in their studies (social, time, financial, professional, etc.). They expect the immediate application of the learning outcomes, often requiring more attention from the teacher than in the framework of basic education. Thus, a distance retraining program with tutor support has a number of advantages:

- the designed program incorporates strategies, methods and approaches of modern linguistics and focuses on different educational needs;
- the practical orientation of training;
- active learning in a social context;
- individual approach to students;
- the convenience of distance learning for employed candidates;
- quality of teaching provided by experienced teacher-tutors.

One of the modules of the program is an online English course, “BENSONS”, the purpose of which is to develop student communicative and ICT competencies. It is based on the “BENSONS” lingua-phone course (by professor Keith Rawson-Jones), which is a cross-cutting storyline from the life of a British family with elements of a detective story. It
is presented in 24 episodes, in the form of dialogues or polylogues, with small inclusions of monologue speech (from the narrator). Thus, listeners have the opportunity to learn an authentic spoken language, Standard English, in which the most frequent idioms are present. The course offers a set of exercises aimed at the formation and improvement of language skills and all types of speech activities, a large amount of country-specific material for reading and listening, participation in guided asynchronous online group discussions, as well as individual consultations and lessons with a tutor in real-time via Skype. The uniqueness of this course is that, despite its obvious practical orientation, it’s at the same time a didactic material on teaching English in a distance mode (the course is based on the PowerSchool Learning educational platform). Therefore, students get the opportunity not only to improve their knowledge of the English language through numerous exercises but also to increase their ICT competence through work in a digital educational environment. The choice of the PowerSchool Learning educational platform is due to the constructivist principles that underlie it and the didactic potential of the tools included. It provides a modular course structure, where each module has a universal structure that includes a set of similar components. The main page contains a menu that provides easy navigation in the course. The training modules are preceded by an introductory information module, which presents a brief annotation, goals and objectives, a curriculum, specifies learning materials, training periods, as well as requirements for studying in the course, describes the regulations for tutor support. The information provided may seem redundant, but we believe it is presented in an optimal way for students without a distance learning experience.

The educational process in this course includes the following forms of work:
• autonomous individual work with the course material (on the PowerSchool Learning educational platform);
• individual counseling sessions with a tutor: in real-time (video chat via Skype) and a delayed mode (by email, etc.);
• guided asynchronous group discussions within the framework of online thematic discussions (on the PowerSchool Learning educational platform);

To create a comfortable learning environment that stimulates the needs and motives of learning activities, considering the personal qualities of students, each of the students is paired with a tutor who can help in solving the following tasks:
• defining the goals and objectives of the course;
• creating a psychologically comfortable learning atmosphere;
• establishing contact with the members of the study group;
• understanding the individual problems in learning;
• organizing independent work;
• assessing the successes and weaknesses of educational growth (Kovaleva et al., 2012; Schennikov, 2019).

Intensive interaction of students with a tutor and other students in a distance mode within the framework of pair and group work ensures the formation of a virtual learning community in conditions of disunity of teaching and learning processes in distance learning. It aims at stimulating thought activity and a deeper understanding of the material being taught.

Let us consider in more detail the technology of tutor support used in this course. At the entrance test stage, which is an essay in English, the level of English proficiency is measured, the previous educational experience and the primary cognitive interests of each student are recorded. Each student is paired with a tutor for the entire period of study for this course, equal to 4 months. One tutor works with a group of 3-6 mentees. Implementing tutor support for students in the course can be presented as the following flowchart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of work</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Stage functions</th>
<th>Forms of tutor support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
<td>Observation, diagnostics of the initial level of proficiency in EL, defining one’s own role and position.</td>
<td>Participation in diagnostics</td>
<td>Diagnostics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Development of an individual educational route together with a mentee, defining goals and objectives of joint activities (selection of communication problems, expansion of active and passive vocabulary, formation and improvement of language skills, familiarization with the cultural characteristics of the country of the target language, the formation of a culture of communication and elements of global thinking), involvement in joint goal-setting, psychological support, removing barriers and clarifying mentee’s cognitive interests. Establishing contact with students and contact of students with each other. Student’s involvement in active work. Motivation training.</td>
<td>Formulation of cognitive interests, active participation in defining goals and objectives of joint activities, clarification of potential difficulties in the process of studying.</td>
<td>Goal setting, motivation training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Support of an individual educational route, identification of individual problems and their correction, motivation support, explanation of complex issues, demonstrating the connection of the course with real practice, the use of differentiated and developmental learning guiding students to understand the topics they bring to each tutoring session, encouraging students to engage actively with their topics to build a deeper understanding, helping build student confidence in their ability to learn and to understand challenging concepts.</td>
<td>Readiness for interaction</td>
<td>Organization of activities, correction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Tutor support analysis, success determination, the reflection of positive experience and difficulties, structured feedback, assessment of the effectiveness of building and implementing an individual educational plan</td>
<td>Reflection of positive experience and difficulties</td>
<td>Control, reflection, motivation training for further development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An individual educational plan is elaborated together with a mentee; the time of classes is set convenient for both parties. Individual lessons (tutorials) with a tutor via Skype take place once a week for 30 minutes for four months. Communication with a tutor (via Skype, e-mail and on the PowerSchool Learning educational platform) is conducted in English. After submitting written assignments that require manual assessment, a student can expect written feedback from a tutor on the educational platform within a week. Suppose a student has questions about the
content of the course when completing self-checked tasks presented on the platform or communicating in a discussion on the forum. In that case a mentee can contact a tutor for advice through the platform’s personal messaging system or by e-mail. A tutor answers within 24 hours on weekdays and within two days at weekends. Prompt feedback, in our opinion, is very important in distance learning so that the student does not feel isolated and feel supported throughout the entire period of study.

Particular attention should be paid to such a form of tutor’s work with the group as guided online discussion. Methodologically appropriate recommendations for organizing a guided online discussion in the course are as follows: student participation in the discussion is mandatory, a tutor takes part in the discussion as a moderator, suggesting problems for discussion and maintaining student’s interest in the discussion. Questions and problems for discussion are formulated on the basis of a tutor’s analysis of the recorded student cognitive interests. Students receive comments on their participation in the discussion (as a rule, outside the framework of the discussion itself, in individual consultations). Working at the forum contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, socialization, the formation of a culture of communication, i.e. has both developmental and educational value (Nazarenko, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Based on the key activities of a tutor, we can conclude that the specific features of tutor support in distance language learning include:

- diagnostics of the initial level of language proficiency;
- informing students about the features of the educational process organization in a distance mode;
- joint definition of goals and objectives;
- developing an individual educational plan, taking into account the initial level of students proficiency training, their educational needs and motivation;
- choosing technologies and forms of tutor support depending on the goals of training, planning of support stages;
- establishing contact with the students and the students contact each other in a digital learning environment;
- stimulating discussion in the forum;
- when identifying individual problems, participation in a joint discussion of approaches to solving problems;
- encouraging the emergence of positive emotions in students, maintaining motivation,
- implementation of a joint targeted search for educational information with students;
- assessing the achievements of students at all stages of training, providing prompt structured feedback, creating conditions for self-reflection;
- assessing the effectiveness of the construction and implementation of an individual educational route
- taking into account students’ satisfaction with the course and results of the educational process.

Typical difficulties in teaching activities might include:

- providing for potential difficulties that students may encounter in the studying process and ways of overcoming them;
- planning the use of new pedagogical and information technologies in the educational process;
- organizing independent extracurricular work of students in the subject;
- stimulating the emergence of students questions, organizing a discussion in the classroom;
- developing creative thinking, independence, initiative in solving proposed problems;
- showing goodwill towards students, interest in their success (Youde, 2016);
- analyzing students activities, needs and individual characteristics based on the achievements of psychological and pedagogical theory,
- creating a model of an individual system of teaching activity on the basis of a new educational paradigm.

Conclusion

Thus, in light of new realities, we should talk about a transition to a new paradigm of education, based on lifelong learning principles focused on self-determination and self-realization of an individual. An interactive learning environment is formed, focused on the student, who becomes an active participant in the educational process. The roles of the learner and the teacher are changing. The student becomes an active participant in the educational process, with a high degree of autonomy and responsibility, the ability to learn in collaboration throughout life. In this regard, the task of rethinking the teacher’s professional activity in the digital environment, especially their active participation in the implementation of tutor support, comes to the fore. The program emphasizes the roles and competencies of the tutor, the techniques, strategies and methods used by them to individualize and enhance training.
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References