

Tutoring peculiarities in Ukrainian high school distance learning

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Abstract. The article deals with tutor's responsibilities in Ukrainian high school distance learning. The problems of implementation of distance learning technologies are highlighted. The authors study specific roles of a tutor in the distance foreign language learning. Four main tutor's functions are distinguished. The authors focus attention on the necessity of the additional training for teachers corresponding to their new functions. The ways of an effective multilevel support in distance foreign language learning are suggested.

Keywords: *education process, distance learning, tutor, technical support, assistance*

The permanent dynamic development of modern society, the renovation of higher education content, the rapid expansion of the information space, the integration of the national education system into the world education community require the sustainable implementation of qualitatively different kinds of teaching models that cater specially to the students of today, are based on their own understanding of subject content, active participation in acquiring new knowledge and skills, focus on the development of student self-learning ability, meet needs, interests, aspirations, promote autonomy, encourage independence and initiative, develop lifelong learning skills, and are supported through innovative computer technologies.

The distance learning model widely practiced all over the world is becoming more and more popular in Ukraine due to its effectiveness, cost, flexibility in terms of space, time, content, resource access as well as the necessity of continuing education in today's competitive world and rapid technological changes. Ukrainian and foreign scholars (L. Bendova, P. Zakotnova, N. Marakhovska, T. Koshmanova, G. Barnier, V. Glikman, G. Salmon, have studied socio-pedagogical, organizational, tutoring and other aspects of distance learning.

As B. Holmberg suggests distance education has two constituent elements, the teaching exposition referred to as one-way traffic in the form of pre-produced course materials involving students in interaction with texts (simulated communication) and the real communication by means of which students have access to personal tutoring and counselling [3, p.15].

Distance education curricula should be carefully and professionally developed combining different forms and methods of interaction, flexibly responding to the educational needs and requirements, providing high quality online tutoring, promoting student independence and autonomy, giving opportunities for multi-level, self-paced learning, enabling students to apply creative and critical thinking, reflective practice, personal exploration of knowledge.

Carefully developed and highly interactive distance learning programmes make it possible to enrich the learning environment, maintain student interest, permit a more intensive, more dynamic interpersonal dialogue, synthesise theory and practice, providing opportunities for professional development and personal growth.

It is worth noting that unfortunately quite often distance learning technologies are understood rather simplistically by Ukrainian teachers that result in transformation of materials used in traditional face-to-face learning to a computer format.

In our view distance learning as a specially organised educational activity based on modern training and information technologies provides not only flexibility and convenience but is also aimed at individualising the process of learning, increasing the level of students' autonomy, developing their own strategies, creating new educational information environment, obtaining the best teaching resources, strengthening the role of independent learning.

The effectiveness of distance learning shouldn't be underestimated as its results can sometimes even exceed those of formal education. Self-directed learning supported through various types of technologies in a flexible educational environment encourages students to use a large amount of information, increases their learning productivity and confidence, allows them to construct knowledge according to the established personal learning goals, their own learning requirements, and to transform abstract knowledge into a personally meaningful experience.

However, the proper implementation of distance learning technologies is time consuming, requires considerable effort on the part of the teacher who helps students to develop their own learning strategies with a certain freedom of action, taking into account their individual characteristics and abilities, active engagement of students in the learning process, and leads to the change of teacher-student interaction.

Focusing specifically on teachers' role in distance education practice it is essential to re-conceive it in terms of distance learning arrangement. The teacher is not a source of information, but an organiser and coordinator of the creative educational process in a learner centered environment.

The distance learning teacher often plays the role of a tutor, relatively speaking, an intermediary between a student and a teacher-developer of a distance learning course. In our view regarding the enhancement of distance education in Ukrainian universities the special attention should be paid to the provision of technical and professional assistance to students, namely the provision of the specialised tutoring system, particularly in foreign language learning.

Initially the tutor's work was to advise students on academic or personal issues. G. Barnier considers a tutor as a person with a certain professional qualification who provides additional individual educational services to students with learning difficulties [1, p. 127]. V. Glickman compares a tutor to a teacher who fulfils a personalised educational function that is transmits knowledge to a student individually or in a small group of students.

In the contemporary information educational environment a tutor means anyone who provides technical support to students, facilitates their effective distance learning being an intermediary between University and developers of distance learning curricula on the one hand, and students on the other hand [4, p. 223].

At this stage we can distinguish four main tutor's functions such as assisting, supporting and resourcing. The tutor's responsibility includes a wide range of activities:

- informing students about courses available and assisting them in the selection of the appropriate training course;
- assessing students' understanding of the course content;
- didactic assistance, mainly centered on the content of the chosen course;
- psychological support that involves motivational aspects;
- social and personal assistance aimed at meeting students' practical and material needs;
- organisational assistance to facilitate access to the administrative resource (scheduling coordination, free access to the learning resource etc);
- technical assistance in setting up software and checking its compatibility;
- special support relevant to students' specific needs;
- assistance in the coordination of student cooperation.

The facilitation of students' independent work is the basis of any tutoring support. Thus a tutor is supposed to have personal experience of online learning, and such abilities as applying flexible approaches to different learning strategies, setting objectives for students, realising the potential of a particular student or a group in online learning, fostering the development of students' abilities, acting as a motivator, analyzing information on student performance, critically assessing tutor's activity, motivating and encouraging reluctant students.

In this case a psycho-pedagogical approach becomes very important in building a bridge of trust between a student and a tutor, showing interest in the student's life, encouraging communication and exchange of views and ideas, showing positive attitude towards a student as an individual, creating effective interaction between students in a group (interaction in pairs, synchronous and asynchronous message exchange).

In many systems of distance learning development of curricula and preparation of plans and printed materials are provided by professionals, i.e. teachers. They aren't involved into organisation of distance work with students. Tutors also have some professional knowledge but they are mostly involved in the communication with students. It goes about a shift in the professional competencies. As G. Salmon points out tutors shouldn't have years of experience or exceptional skills but only that level of knowledge that can be applied for the course they work on. The key competency in setting up the process of distance learning in the scholar's opinion belongs to "emotional intellect" consisting of motivation and intuition. Therefore the emotional aspect is considered as a driving force of any communication or human relationship [5, p. 53-55].

We agree with the previous scholars, and it's noteworthy to add that a tutoring support shouldn't be executed only on the psychological or organizational levels but on the specialised one. It presupposes the specialisation support to be executed by curricula developers so that the important factor in tutor – student interaction belongs to tutor's profes-

sional knowledge. This argument becomes crucial in foreign language learning where tutor's profound language skills help to organise and control the student's work or to provide an effective personal consulting. The statement can be proved by a survey made among students of the Rouen University (France). The respondents, WebCT distance platform users, were asked about the effectiveness of tutors, teachers and students interaction [2].

The results showed that 41 % out of 112 interviewed students "never contacted with their tutor", 37 % "had a few contacts", 19 % "often contacted" and 3% "very often contacted". In other words 78% of students didn't contact or seldom contacted with the tutor to ask for help. Most of respondents confessed that while solving difficult issues they relied on forum chats. Moreover the communication with the tutor on the curriculum content proved less effective because tutors weren't specialised in the given field whereas 55 % of students required the constant tutor support. They complained about the lack of verbal communication, personal meetings, individual assistance in the given professional field as well as clear-cut answers on their questions while the tutor interaction was reduced to references to certain web links. Thus as the given example shows, one of the conditions of the effective distance support, in the students' opinion, is a specialised professional training of the tutor in the field he is appointed to.

In distance foreign language learning besides organizational and technical competencies the specialisation in the language that is taught or used in the distance curricula, is required. In the Ukrainian practice of distance foreign language learning a teacher being at the same time a tutor, corrects written assignments, provides immediate comments, answers questions concerning the language peculiarities, monitors the progress of a particular student or a group by arranging, for example, online meetings in order to provoke foreign language verbal communication, sets up discussions, asks questions relevant to student individual potential and interests and is able to provide a total control of the curriculum in order to interfere in time when it's required. At the final stage he assesses the whole work of students taking into consideration everyone's contribution, and checks the degree of language materials comprehension.

When analysing the amount of work completed by a teacher-tutor in Ukraine we can state that the number of distant students, a teacher must deal with, becomes a significant disadvantage. Paying attention to the specific requirements of distance foreign language learning, in many European countries, for instance, a group for tutor support doesn't exceed 5-6 students whereas in Ukraine it can reach up 18-20 students.

The technical competency is also very important. The technical support mostly includes distance software setup and appropriate communication options. Therefore, the knowledge of current software and distance platform is a key point. Fast screen reading, mobility and constant access to the Internet; abilities to assess basic structures of online conferences and web and Internet learning potential; to use particular software features such as controlling, archiving, tracking the actions of students as a platform users, i.e. history of messages, monitoring the time of use and results; to configure and hold online conferences and other online activities, to create the learning

environment, to use alternative software and distance platforms, should be considered as a technically proved necessity. The moderating of useful web resources will allow to apply them as triggers in online assignments and to produce creative online learning participants' feedback.

In the Ukrainian realities the attempts to introduce distance courses have revealed a set of problems conditioned by a low technical competency of several professors and students, insufficient technical equipment, distance curricula irrelevant to the distance platform in use as well as the students' reluctance to be responsible for the process and results of their own educational activity.

The most important tasks in the current conditions of national distance learning environment that will allow to eliminate all the above-mentioned drawbacks, must be arranging effective training courses aimed at improving informational and technical culture of students and professors, developing relevant curricula, applying a differentiated approach to group students in order that their number shouldn't exceed 10-12 people, developing assignments meeting students language possibilities. It will allow on the

one hand to increase motivation and self-esteem of students, and, on the other hand, to foster the flexibility and intensification of the learning process in whole.

In conclusion assuming the fact that in the system of distance learning a tutor acts as a transmitter of knowledge he has to be a teacher as well as to provide the technical support of educational process. The following combination of professional roles requires an additional education correspondent to new functions. In this case a tutor becomes a conductor, a guide, a person accumulating educational resources. At the same time he facilitates transfer of knowledge, assists students in the process of individual learning at all stages by setting objectives, selecting materials, assessing the results achieved. The tutor stimulates motivation to learn, promotes the development of students' reflective skills and fosters their potential; anticipates learning difficulties and advises how to overcome them. He focuses students' efforts on the selection of effective learning strategies and ways of solving problems and applying knowledge and skills acquired in the professional activities.

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