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The Stages of Developing a Discourse-Oriented Virtual Learning Environment Model

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Abstract

The article aims at describing the stages of developing a model of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for teaching English professionally-oriented discourse. To achieve this goal, the author systematizes the existing approaches to developing various distance learning models. As a result, the most extensive didactic approach to creating a VLE was detected and chosen for further adaptation to the discourse-oriented language instruction. Next, each stage of developing a VLE model was refined based on the key methodological implications of the discourse approach in Linguodidactics. Finally, the example of the Discourse-Oriented VLE (DO-VLE) model for training IT specialists in professionally-oriented English discourse is provided as the result of following the suggested VLE development stages. Thus, the study describes the discursive approach to DO-VLE and exemplifies this process by tackling specific IT discourse. In addition, the methodological approach to DO-VLE creation, lying within the synergetic scope of Digital Didactics and the discourse approach in Linguodidactics, can be applied in developing various distance learning activities. The scientific value of the study, therefore, consists in describing the stages of developing a DO-VLE as well as in outlining some theoretical grounds for a shift from VLE to DO-VLE concepts in Linguodidactics.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Environment, Professional Discourse, English Discourse Teaching, Distance Learning, Discourse Approach

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УДК 378.147.15 https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2022.03.07 Научная статья

Стадии разработки модели дискурсориентированной виртуальной образовательной среды

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Аннотация

Целью исследования является описание этапов разработки модели виртуальной образовательной среды (ВОС) для обучения англоязычному профессионально-ориентированному дискурсу. Для достижения заявленной цели автором были систематизированы существующие подходы к созданию моделей дистанционного обучения. В результате был установлен методологический подход, наиболее полно описывающий стадии разработки моделей ВОС. Далее содержание каждой из выявленных стадий было уточнено с учетом ключевых положений дискурсивного подхода к обучению иностранным языкам. Кроме этого, в статье представлен пример дискурс-(ДО-BOC) ИТ-специалистов ориентированной BOC для обучения англоязычному профессионально-ориентированному дискурсу. Таким образом, в исследовании рассмотрен дискурсивный подход к разработке моделей ВОС на примере конкретного ИТ-дискурса. В дополнение лежащий в основе разработки методологический подход, находящийся на пересечении цифровой дидактики и дискурсивного подхода в лингводидактике, может быть реализован при проектировании различных учебных событий в онлайн формате. Таким образом, научная ценность исследования заключается в описании стадий дискурс-ориентированного подхода к разработке ВОС, а также в уточнении некоторых методологических оснований, указывающих на целесообразность перехода от концепта ВОС к концепту ДО-ВОС в лингводидактике.

Ключевые слова: Виртуальная образовательная среда, Профессиональный дискурс, Обучение англоязычному дискурсу, Дистанционное обучение, Дискурсивный подход

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Special Topic: *Technologies in a Multilingual World* Тема выпуска *"Технологии в мультилингвальном мире"*



INTRODUCTION

The continuous digitalization of the educational sphere gives rise to many scientific papers dedicated to establishing the ways of efficient integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into the educational process.

One such way is creating and implementing a model of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which is understood as a specifically constructed multi-faceted didactic system of integrated ICT for attaining educational goals (Weindorf-Sysoyeva et al., 2018).

In the current study, we refer to VLE as a distance learning model. Other models include the integration of offline and online classes (blended learning), autonomous distance education courses, virtual schools and universities (network learning), the integration of the Internet and case-based technologies, video conferencing (Polat, 2020, p.78).

Substantial research specifically on the modeling of Virtual Learning Environments was done by Weindorf-Sysoyeva et al. (2018), the scientific school of Polat (2020), Ravanelli (2020), and others. The construction of different models of distance and blended learning in Linguodidactics was undertaken in the works of Titova (2018), Solovyeva (2019), Sysoyev (2020), and others.

At the same time, no attempt has been previously made to highlight the implications of VLE creation and implementation in the discourse approach to language teaching. The approach considers human communication as a multifaceted phenomenon, which includes not only linguistic but also extra-linguistic factors, consideration of which is necessary for the process of teaching intercultural communication in online environments (Tarnaeva & Lyubshina, 2018). The discourse-oriented language teaching relies heavily on the results of discourse analysis, which determine not only the syllabus but also means and instruments of instruction.

Consequently, we assume that the process and principles of creating the discourseoriented VLE (DO-VLE) should derive from a revisited methodological basis to constructing and implementing distance learning models.

Hence, the current research aims at describing the stages of developing and implementing the model of DO-VLE for teaching English professionally-oriented discourse.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As the discourse approach in linguodidactics is gaining popularity along with continuous digitalization of education, there is a demand to study the ways of creating an adaptable, multifaceted DO-VLE. While substantial research has been previously done in the field of defining and describing the process of creating and implementing various distance learning models (including VLE), as indicated by Bannink & Van Dam (2021) and Arantes (2022), little analysis has been carried out in terms of adapting this process to the discourse approach. The current article presents a synergetic scientific standpoint as a result of approaching two research areas. In particular, we assume that the results of



the discourse analysis that are used to define the syllabus, forms and means of language instruction outline specific features of the DO-VLE on each stage of its construction.

The following shows that the relevance of the research lies in developing a highly adaptable VLE model for discourse-oriented foreign language instruction based on an indepth methodological grounding of the underlying construction principles.

RESEARCH AIMS

The main objective of the research is to define and describe the stages of creating and implementing the DO-VLE. This objective determined a set of research subtasks:

• to define the VLE construction stages most frequently referred to in scientific papers;

• to reveal the peculiarities of implementing the construction stages in the discourse-oriented framework;

• to provide an example of DO-VLE (by the example of the DO-VLE for teaching English professionally oriented IT discourse).

RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

At the first stage of the research, the content analysis method is used to determine the stages of distance learning models construction that are referred to in scientific resources. The main category of the analysis is represented by the dedicated 'stage of creating the model.' If the study describes the order of VLE components that students attend in their study rather than the sequence of their creation from the instructor's perspective (for instance, in the study conducted by Titova (2018)), the order of the components is interpreted as a correspondent sequence of construction stages. The final objective of the content analysis is to build a cross-tabulation chart to detect the most extensive concept of the VLE model (see Table 1).

The materials for the content analysis include various theses, scientific articles, and e-learning guidebooks, including "Pedagogical Technologies of Distance Learning" by Polat (2020), "Theoretical Approaches to the Design of Electronic Educational Environment in Technology Education" by Weindorf-Sysoeva et al. (2018), "Information and Communication Technologies in Pedagogical Education" by Kiselyov & Bochkova (2020), "The Cambridge Handbook of Multimedia Learning" by Mayer & Fiorella (2021), "Distance Education for Teacher Training: Modes, Models, and Methods" by Burns (2011).

The second stage of the research aims to describe the implications of the discourse approach to language teaching at each stage of the VLE creation process. This stage integrates both scientific literature analysis and discourse analysis methods. The literature review showed that the sociolinguistic approach to discourse analysis is considered most appropriate for application in Linguodidactics as it allows defining pragmalinguistic characteristics of speech activity under certain conditions (e.g., in the process of software development) (Karasik, 2004). The further analysis of discourse components (participants, roles, genres, strategies, values, chronotopes) was necessary to define the component composition of a DO-VLE model as well as to select the necessary types of



electronic educational resources (EER) as the technological basis of the model. The procedure and the results of the discourse analysis, however, are not discussed in this article in detail.

The third stage of the research is based on describing the DO-VLE model, including revealing different interconnections of its components, the correlation between the model and the discourse analysis, and highlighting the underlying principles of selecting EER and distance interaction forms for each component. The process is exemplified by the DO-VLE for teaching English professional IT discourse.

FINDINGS

At the first research stage, the content analysis of scientific works was conducted. The aim of the analysis was to detect the most extensive approach to defining the stages of creating and implementing VLE in modern Didactics. The general approach to the content analysis and data collection is presented in Table 1.

The analysis has shown that the scientific school of E. Polat most extensively describes the stages of distance learning models development, which include: a) selecting the learning theory, (b) selecting the technological basis for the distance learning model, (c) determining the component composition of the model, (d) assigning the content, methods, and means of distance interaction, and expected learning outcomes of each component of the model, (e) defining types, forms, and means of monitoring learning achievements (Polat, 2020).

Therefore, to comply with the methodology of the research, the concept of VLE modeling stages provided by the scientific school of E. Polat was chosen as the basis for further adaptation to the discourse-oriented teaching framework as it appeared to provide the most extensive methodological basis in the context of the current study.

At the second stage of the research, the specifics of creating a VLE model for discourse-oriented language teaching were revealed and combined with each of the five stages:

1. Selecting learning theory (methodological stage) implies the synergy of the discourse approach with other linguodidactical approaches (e.g., discourse-oriented communicative-cognitive approach to language teaching) or assigning the discourse approach to language teaching as the main one. In a very general way, as indicated by Tarnaeva & Plekhova (2018), the discourse approach is based on taking into account the socio- and pragma-linguistic features of a certain discourse. An important component of the approach, inter alia, is mastering the students' knowledge about universal and nationally specific features of a discourse functioning sphere (e.g., business culture), which must be reflected in the DO-VLE model. The discourse approach is grounded in the processes of analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of intercultural information, considering all characteristics of a communicative situation. Consequently, the discourseoriented approach implies not only teaching oral communication skills to students and mastering their language skills, but also teaching them how to implement and recognize various speech strategies and tactics in the process of decomposing pragma- and sociolinguistic environments (Buzila, 2019; Elkouti & Kouti, 2022). The DO-VLE model,



therefore, must be constructed as a socio-linguistic subsystem comprising all the discourse components' features. For instance, in the case of IT discourse, the metainformation component (see Figure 1) is considered essential as it had been revealed that IT specialists share professionally related information continuously in an asynchronous mode (Balyshev, 2021). Including the metainformation component to address the IT specialists' needs in language training aims to increase both the learner autonomy and the level of integrating the DO-VLE in a wider system of professional communication.

Authors Stages	D.G. Soloranzo	Titova S.V.	Akimova I.V. et al.	Scientific school of Polat E.S.
1. Methodological	Choosing the pedagogical approach	_	Analyzing aims of VLE development	Selecting the learning theory
2. Technological	Setting the interface features	Representing the syllabus using web-resources	_	Selecting the technological basis
3. Structuring	_	Selecting ICTs for educational content presentation and student collaboration	Determining the component composition of the model	Determining the component composition of the model
4. Specifying	Assigning the forms of online activities	Creating modules with the information about the author and additional information	Programming and approbation	Assigning the content, methods, means, and learning outcomes of distance interaction
5. Controlling	Evaluating the learning outcomes	Evaluation of the web course	Adjustments and refinement based on the feedback	Defining types, forms, and means of monitoring learning achievements

Table 1. The stages of creating a VLE model: the results of the content-analysis



2. Since the discourse approach suggests providing students with a variety of tasks to detect and produce different speech strategies and tactics, as well as master their discourse language and speech skills and acquire a set of knowledge about the sphere of discourse functioning (e.g., intercultural business communication), a DO-VLE must meet the abovementioned requirements by comprising a set of didactically relevant ICT of various types and with specific technological features (Bamrara, 2020). The set of ICT that is considered sufficient to implement the discourse approach in constructing online environments is represented in each component of the DO-VLE model in Figure 1 and includes basic, substitutive, constructive, communicative, and integrative EER (Solovyova, 2019).

As described by Solovyova (2019), basic EER include mainly textual resources, which are not sufficiently integrative and polysensory, created within such basic applications as MS Words, Pages, etc. This type of EER is used in the DO-VLE mainly for delivering asynchronous instructions and posting announcements in the instructional component. Substitutive resources represent a wide range of hypertext-based audiovisual materials that provide feedback. These include multimedia training courses, textbooks, software simulators, etc. This type of EER is applied for delivering authentic texts as sources of universal and nationally specific traits of a discourse functioning sphere in the authentic texts component. The feedback option is used for presenting self-assessment tasks to students. Constructive EER allow the teacher to develop audiovisual and interactive content using the tools and templates offered by the resource. This is the main group for VLE modeling as it allows teachers to adapt educational materials for distance learning, usually without special programming skills. This type is widely used to build online exercises in discourse skills development component of the DO-VLE. Communicative EER are intended for organizing distance oral and written speech learner interaction in a foreign language. Finally, integrative resources enable the functioning of different types of EER as a unified system within the framework of the DO-VLE. We consider such resources to be mainly distance learning management systems such as Canvas LMS, Blackboard, Google Classroom, Edmodo, etc.

The methodological principles of EER selection include such traditional didactic principles as the principle of hypermedia visualization, the principle of developing learning autonomy, the principle of maximum individualization and differentiation, the principle of interactivity, and others (Leontieva et al., 2017; Mayer & Fiorella, 2020).

Despite the technological stage being widely investigated in various studies, we consider it necessary to introduce the new principle for modeling the DO-VLE specifically. It is the principle of considering the discourse components.

For instance, having analyzed IT discourse in its 'participants' component led to revealing a number of participants roles that use different speech strategies and tactics (e.g., frontend developers, techsupport, scrum-masters, sysops, etc.). In this particular case, the communicative EER included in the DO-VLE must have break-out rooms for assigning communicative partners to collaborate together based on their leading discourse roles. For other discourses, however, the break-out rooms feature might appear redundant as the participants roles can be limited to very few (e.g., personal psychotherapeutic discourse).



Introducing this new principle, therefore, results in a more precise approach to selecting EER at the technological stage of creating a DO-VLE.

3. Considering the implications of the methodological and technological stages, and based on the analysis of different approaches to determining the component composition of VLE models (Doneva et al., (2007); OECD, (2017); Scherbina et al., (2020)), it has been disclosed that the DO-VLE must comprise the following set of components for minimal sufficiency:

• instructional component (for an overall student orientation in the VLE, delivering instructions, posting announcements, and developing goal-setting skills).

• authentic texts component (for providing students with authentic texts as sources of information about universal and nationally specific traits of a discourse functioning sphere and as samples of professional communication that reveal most frequent speech strategies and tactics).

• discourse skills development component (for developing skills of identifying and implementing speech strategies and tactics in professional discourse).

• assessment component (for assessing (including self-assessment and peerassessment) skills in identifying and implementing discourse speech strategies and tactics in various professionally oriented communicative situations).

• meta-information component (for hosting extra materials and organizing continuous professionally related communication in the foreign language).

The interconnectivity of the DO-VLE components as well as their relation to the sociolinguistic discourse components are shown in Figure 1 (on the example of IT discourse).

As it will be discussed further, the structuring stage of the DO-VLE creation might imply different components with their structure and interconnection being dependent on the specific discourse. In our case, the structure is based on the sociolinguistic analysis of IT discourse that had been carried out for six components: participants, values, genres, chronotopes, values, goals (Karasik, 2004; Balyshev, 2021). It should be stated that despite highlighting some of the discourse analysis implications for developing a DO-VLE further at the specifying stage, discussing the extended results of the discourse analysis is not included in this article.

4. At the fourth stage of developing a DO-VLE, it is necessary to assign the content, methods, means, and learning outcomes of distance interaction within each component.

Applying the discourse approach at the specifying stage suggests the following implications.





Goals and values of ITdiscourse participants

Figure 1. The DO-VLE model for training IT specialists in English discourse



As it is shown in Figure 1, the instructional component contains announcements, instructions on how to work in the DO-VLE, class schedules, reference material, an online course calendar, etc. The content of the instructional component is implemented through such ways of distance interaction as online discussions, interactive discussions, and placing links to reference material. Learning outcomes of the component include developing goal-setting skills, skills of searching and allocating information, etc.

Although the contents of the instructional component do not differ much from similar materials in non-DO-VLEs, the ways of online interaction and correspondent EER depend a lot on a specific discourse. In our case, the indicated ways of distance interaction reflect the main values of the participants in IT discourse, which include the openness of all subsystems of professional communication, the relevance of the professional tasks, the collegial approach to solving issues, etc. (according to the results of the discourse analysis by Balyshev (2021)). An exemplary task in the instructional component is given below.

Task: The oncoming class will be dedicated to IT workplace rules. Range the following rules in Miro in the order from the least significant to the most significant one according to your opinion. Explain your choice and comment on your colleagues' explanations using the comments section (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Instructional component task aimed at activating the skill of anticipating the subject matter and the general structure of the next lesson

The authentic texts component of the DO-VLE includes authentic texts as samples of professional communication implementing speech strategies and tactics that are frequent in IT discourse. Besides, the component contains texts as sources of information



on universal and nationally specific traits of business culture (Almazova et al., 2018; Mewald, C. & Czasny, 2019; Skiada, 2021).

Texts about business culture can be delivered to students asynchronously with interactive text tasks to check understanding of various business culture traits. The discourse approach implies creating different text tasks or adding links to additional material depending on what knowledge of discourse functioning sphere is most relevant to different participants roles. The means of content delivery are substitutive EER (video and audio podcasts (https://goo.gle/developers), polycode texts (e.g., in MS Sway), etc.) and constructive EER (resources for creating interactive videos with embedded text questions and feedback functions (e.g., https://en.islcollective.com/video-lessons/)). An exemplary task of the component is provided below.

Task: Watch the interactive video "Humor and culture in international business | Chris Smit | TEDxLeuven" and answer the questions. The questions will appear automatically at certain points. If you need to re-watch the part of the video before the question, press the 'Rewatch' button. If the highlighted words are not known to you, click on them to get the definition (see Figure 3).

• Which sense of humor is self-deprecating according to Chris Smit? (Options: British, Dutch, German)

• Which sense of humor tends to be blunter and sexually connotated? (Options: British, Dutch, German)

• If it's a not good idea to start a business meeting with a joke, then you are having a meeting with ...? (Options: the British, the Dutch, the Germans)

• In which of the two countries the answer "I don't know" is quite alright to be heard from the management stuff? (Options: in France, in the US)

• If you work in a team of mostly UK professionals, would you feel stronger or weaker hierarchy as compared to "all-Russians" teams? (options: stronger, weaker)



Figure 3. Interactive text task aimed at acquiring knowledge about nationally specific traits of IT discourse functioning sphere



The text component is inseparably connected with the discourse skills development component, and with the help of basic (document in Microsoft Word, Adobe Acrobat), constructive (https://app.wizer.me/) and substitutive (https://lingua.com/businessenglish/reading/) EER it provides authentic texts of English IT discourse as samples of business communication that are used to form, improve, and develop speech skills necessary for participation in the English-language professional IT discourse.

The ways of distance interaction in the discourse skills development component are conditioned by a specific set of discourse-oriented tasks and exercises (which is not reviewed in the article in detail). The means of implementation include communicative (Zoom, Skype), constructive (Etreniki, Wizerme, Perusall), and communicativeintegrative (Webroom) EER. The expected outcomes include forming and developing the speech skills necessary to implement speech strategies and tactics of English professional IT discourse.



Figure 4. The functional scheme of a dialogue as the basis for implementing speech strategies and tactics

Overall, the discourse approach has no direct universal implications for the specifying stage in the discourse skills development component. However, as it has been stated earlier, applying the discourse analysis method ensures searching for specific features of the EER. In the example of the DO-VLE for IT specialists, important properties of the EER selected for this component are the abilities to organize paired and group interaction when completing exercises (e.g., Webroom), and to provide virtual



rooms for swapping communicative partners (e.g., Zoom). These technical capacities allow taking into account the network form of professional communication and the collegial approach to dealing with professional tasks. Another important feature of the EER in the discourse skills development component is the ability for a teacher to upload functional schemes as the basis for implementing speech strategies and tactics of a specific discourse. An exemplary exercise is provided below.

Task: Work in groups of three. You are going to have a brainstorm meeting. The aim of the meeting is to elaborate on the ideas for the new delivery mobile service. Follow the structure of the meeting presented on the white board. Make use of additional Useful Language (see Figure 4).

The meta-information component is allocated, firstly, for reflecting on the educational activities in group online discussions, debates, and by completing interactive polls. Secondly, the meta-information component represents a database of professional materials in the foreign language, which is expanded by the students themselves and involves teacher-initiated (but almost unsupervised) pair and group online discussions of professionally significant topics in synchronous and asynchronous modes. The meta-information component also contributes to the development of learner autonomy, because in the process of discussion students can identify their needs to study certain aspects of the topic and with the help of their colleagues aim at finding the necessary information (Hu & Zhang, 2017; Elshareif & Mohamed, 2021). An exemplary task inside the meta-information component is presented in Figure 5.







The technological implementation of this component is based on basic, integrative, and communicative EER. These resources allow students to share and discuss important professional information in the foreign language (links to professional articles, high-tech news, etc.), using speech strategies and tactics of professional discourse. The expected outcomes include students' reflection on learning activities, application of speech strategies and tactics in professionally relevant communication, activization of students' independent foreign language learning skills, and supporting individual educational trajectories (Soldatov & Soldatova, 2021).

In addition, the meta-information component serves as an object of the teacher's analysis that provides information of interest on the level of learners' expertise in various professional spheres. This is necessary for organizing efficient educational interaction within the rest of the components and adjusting the content, tasks, and instructions, which ensures the dynamics and adaptability of the DO-VLE.

In the discourse approach to creating a VLE model, the meta-information component can include different variables depending on the specific professional discourse. For example, the discourse of health care providers might demand extra links to laws and regulations in Russia and other countries. At the same time, the meta-information component might appear unnecessary for teaching personal (as opposed to institutional) discourse.

Finally, the entire model functions at the expense of integrative EER that integrate the resources of all components into a single system, making it possible to organize a manageable learning process (Google Classroom, Edmodo, Canvas LMS, etc.).

5. The description of the assessment component refers to the controlling stage (determining the forms, types, and means of control when creating a VLE model). The individual form of control in the DO-VLE can be carried out both by using substitutive EER (pre-prepared sets of lexical and grammatical exercises: https://www.perfect-english-grammar.com/, https://www.englisch-hilfen.de, etc.), and with the help of constructive EER for creating individualized tasks (Coreapp, Wizerme, LearningApps, etc.). For pair or group forms of control, it is reasonable to use virtual rooms with built-in test tasks for pairs or groups of learners at the expense of communicative-integrative resources (e.g., Webroom). Communicative EER serve to control the development of speech skills that are necessary for the implementation of speech strategies and tactics. An exemplary assessment activity is given below.

6. *Task*: Sort out business culture peculiarities into three columns: those belonging to Western business culture, Russian business culture, or both (see Figure 6).

The discourse approach delivers different implications that need to be considered when developing a DO-VLE in its assessment component. For instance, the value component of discourse analysis is of high importance. In the case of IT discourse one of the most prominent results was to detect the hierarchical organization and open communication of different participants roles in everything that is connected to professional activity and education (Balyshev, 2021 p.20-37). This led to assigning EER with open access for collaboration, editing, and commenting when rating students' projects and portfolios (e.g., Notion, Confluence, etc.).



Western business culture	Russian culture	business	Universal

More intense gesticulation, weaker hierarchy, respect towards culture and traditions of a business partner, some mixture of personal and business, stronger hierarchy, teamwork as the highest value



Figure 6. An assessment task in Etreniki (constructive EER)

The choice might differ for specialists trained in, for example, legal industry, military, or civil service discourses.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The DO-VLE model described in the article might be adjusted to a specific group of learners based on the presented methodological approach that is closely connected with the growing relevance of the discourse analysis method (explored by Fairclough (2013), Van Dijk (2019), and others) and the discourse approach in Linguodidactics.

The research, however, does not exhaust the whole variety of theoretical and practical problems of creating and implementing DO-VLE models for organizing distance foreign language teaching. Further research into the psychological foundations and cognitive aspects of distance discourse-oriented learning is needed as it belongs to the issues of considerable scientific interest.

Nevertheless, the results obtained contribute to further research on implementing the discourse teaching approach in distance and blended learning environments.



The DO-VLE model might also serve as the theoretic basis for developing discourse-oriented language web courses or structuring online language classes.

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