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УДК 37.013.32

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Teaching English Language within the Confines of TikTok Culture Paradigm

В статье рассматриваются психолого-педагогические подходы к обучению на уроках английского языка в рамках перехода от онлайн-преподавания к традиционному школьному преподаванию после пандемии COVID-19.

Ключевые слова: педагогика, английский язык, практика, преподавание, ТикТок, интернет, вовлечённость

This article focuses on pedagogical and psychological aspects of teaching students in an English language class after the post-pandemic online-to-offline education shift.

Keywords: pedagogics, English language, practice, teaching, TikTok, internet, involvement

It is obvious that the world changed a lot within the last couple of years. COVID-19 restrictions and the never-ending waves of pandemic circling the world brought a new realm to the pedagogical process. No matter whether you are in China or Russia or Ghana or any other country, you are bound to have experienced all the guilty pleasures of online teaching (or learning for that matter).

Once considered a narrowly-focused gimmick available via a set of specialized applications and web-based platforms, online education has become all the rage too fast too soon. All around the world there appear international platforms to facilitate distance learning; methodologists are adapting centuries-old study processes to this new online format, and students are experiencing Fourth Industrial Revolution first-hand [7, p. 9].

I suggest to have a good look into the mindset of those students. No doubt, when it all began, a massive shift to online education seemed to be an obvious god-send for students. Most of them were sure that studying over the internet would be as entertaining as watching video blogs on YouTube or sharing their opinions on Reddit. Apparently, it didn't turn out exactly that way. With no ability for real-time face-to-face interaction with their classmates, and a fairly loose lesson involvement control,

online education took a backseat to the younger generation's other online activities. What are those activities, one may ask.

Have a good hard look at your family. Should you be one of those lucky families to own an iPad or any other tablet, aren't you just too happy to give that tablet to your kid or kids, so that they leave you alone for some time, providing you with that special "me moment," when you can check your own social media or watch that short video or maybe even share a post or two with your online pals? The real question here is – how much are you in control of what content your kids consume via their smartphones or tablets? Sure enough, a bunch of tech-savvy parents may take some time out of their busy schedule so as to set YouTube Kids up or go through those browser plugins making sure their kids are safe from restricted content or are receiving educational information only. Yet – let us face it – many of us would be hard-pressed to understand the terms in the previous sentence you just read, and those who would are just too busy to master that digital kung-fu.

Right, so let us pick up that kid's iPad and see which apps they have on their home screen and in dock. That will most likely be YouTube, TikTok, a couple of PvP games or MMORPGs, and Twitch. There will also be Minecraft, which is a cultural phenomenon in itself, and probably a couple of big titles like PUBG or Fortnite. Generally speaking, those apps can be divided into those where users either create and share content, or are involved in a certain online activity, be it co-op or battle royale or something in-between.

Now let us open aforementioned apps one by one and see the tendencies in user-content and user-user interaction, shall we? A surprising find will be that young learners are bombarded with short videos and are herded into super-fast gaming sessions. To illustrate that, TikTok videos are a minute or less [1, p. 22]; and online matches are up to 30 minutes in length. Living fast, thinking fast, and getting easily bored are the key trends for online content today. Yes, sure, YouTube allows for uploading and watching videos of pretty much of any length, yet have a look at your kid's YouTube "Watched" list – I bet you won't find lengthy documentaries or extensive Harvard lectures there.

All this boils down to a fact that the attention span of a modern student has been significantly shortened by the online media environment they find themselves in. I welcome you to carry out the following experiment - give your phone with YouTube open on it to a younger member of your family, and notice their behavior. Use a timer if you wish, and you will see that every 10-15 seconds they click on the next video still not having watched whatever they had previously been watching to the end. They will skip from video to video, not paying much attention to what happens on the screen. That is the behavior that is being promoted by media holdings and game devs. Let us leave the reasoning for this out of this article and focus on how this new mindset and the availability of those apps influence our classic English language lesson.

Firstly, a couple of paragraphs back I mentioned that an online class is usually just a background to other more exciting online activities. It is nearly impossible to station a teenager in front of a computer screen and have them not open a browser window alongside whatever Zoom lesson they are having. This leads us to an inconvenient truth: ever since our children started their full-time online study, most of them have been doing more than, well, studying. And most of what they did online, worked towards the goal of shortening their attention span and involving them into fast-paced activities.

The most wicked thing in this process is: when all the studying was done on-site, in schools, that is, kids had more to interact with - be it their classmates, their teachers, their immediate physical environment, and such. Most of the schools enforced a certain no-phones policy, and class involvement could be easily enhanced, measured, monitored, and reported if necessary. Online study mode pretty much broke it all.

Now that the students are returning to schools, teachers seem to start to notice a certain difference in their target material perception and knowledge acquisition. The revelations have been consistent across the board: students don't listen, they get easily bored, they lose their focus, lesson dynamic is not dynamic enough for them, and they are most always willing to "do something else," yet they are unsure what exactly. I call it TikTok culture.

This article aims at providing English language teachers with a set of methodological tips for conducting more involving lessons and for enhancing their students' attention span in their offline classes. These approaches to English language teaching will hopefully break the mold of that "boring English lesson" and allow for more exciting classwork for both teachers and their students. The tips mentioned below do not follow any particular order, and may very well be used individually to spice up a certain class or in freeform combinations in order to adapt rigid lesson material to the flexible mindset of particular students and group dynamic of a particular class.

1. TikTok is your friend

It is obvious that allowing your students to freely use their smartphones in class results in chaos and procrastination. Online research may well turn into a sudden gaming session, and dictionary use may end up as a mindless newsfeed scroll. There are a bunch of reasons for that. Firstly, students are usually unable to control their focused smartphone usage. Their interests are all over the place, and it is their second nature to open two or three apps in parallel and switch between them at a whim.

Secondly, there will always be something more exciting to do online than the task at hand. Simply put, students would rather be checking Instagram updates than checking their dictionaries. They would much rather watch a 30-second videoclip than a 30-minute lecture.

What happens if you fumble it upside down? Suggestion is: give your students a "TikTok Task." Have them make a short video (as they would make one for Tik-

Tok) pertaining to the topic of your class, be it grammar or vocabulary or a cultural phenomenon you are supposed to discuss according to your curriculum.

Set this task up by highlighting three to five key notions that you would want your students to reflect in their video. Put them on the board and make sure your students understand what is wanted of them. Next, explain the guidelines for your task. Tell your students that they are given a unique opportunity to create a TikTok video for this particular subject. Check their comprehension and allocate the mode of work (individual / paired / in teams) and the timing for exercise completion. You may ask students to go out of your classroom to choose different locations for their videos if your school rules allow that.

Make sure that every student / pair / team has a charged smartphone and notice that the absence of TikTok app on their smartphones is not a problem. The key task here is to create a video in TikTok format, not necessarily on TikTok app. Thusly the video should be short, fun if possible, and should have some background music to it so that the viewers enjoy their viewing experience.

Students may as well upload their creations to TikTok if they are willing to and if your school provides a stable WiFi network, since the possibility of doing that is adding an extra layer of realism to the task.

Circulate and monitor students' involvement and activity. Once everyone is done, have students share their videos and ask them for feedback. The natural thing to do would be to play their videos on the big screen if your classroom is equipped with one. If not, you may ask students to send them into their class group chat on WhatsApp or Telegram or Viber or any other app of their choice.

This kind of approach where you task students with working on otherwise "forbidden" or "playful" media content not only helps your class practice their language skills, but also allows for establishing that rapport with younger learners that many of us teachers tend to lose due to the generation gap and an overwhelming digital divide.

2. Team them up

One cannot overemphasize the importance of teamwork in class. Unfortunately, many of English language curricula and class plans are written in such a way that they allow little to no possibility of actually implementing this pedagogical device in a real-life class.

First, there is usually a fixed sitting arrangement. Second, there usually is a lack of extra activity time in class. Third, there is a problem of dividing your class into teams in a quick and meaningful way. Yet all those should not be a hindrance for promoting this essential twenty-first century skill in an English language lesson.

There could be various kinds of tasks where teamwork is engaging and fruitful. My experience shows that creative tasks where students need to design and present or research and present are the most interesting ones for the majority of the students.

Setting up teamwork is a skill in its own right. A functional team should be of about four to six people. It is important to mention that just dividing your class into research teams would not do the trick. A good way to ease students into this mode of interactive work is to allocate roles within each team, for example: a leader, an engineer, an artist, a question master, a Negative Nancy and a note-taker. [5, p. 29] This way everyone will have a certain scenario to follow, and a teacher would also be able to incorporate an element of role-play into their class.

Once the teams are set and the roles are distributed, allocate a special space for each team. It could be opposing corners of your classroom or different classrooms altogether. Make sure that you supply your teams with all the necessary tools to complete their task (for example, design projects might require A3 paper or a flip chart, a set of color markers, and a ruler). Enhance the team spirit by priming the students with the notion of friendly competition. It is a good idea to bring in an element of video game reference by explaining it to them that this is pretty much Brawl Stars in real life. Set time for task completion and monitor students' involvement by visiting both teams' work spaces.

Make it a rule that when presenting their research or design, each of the team members needs to say at least a couple of sentences. This will provide everyone with an equal opportunity to speak in class, and it will also push shy students to actually talk. A wonderful option is to gather a "panel of judges" for the presentation part. I usually ask free teachers lounging in the Teachers' Room to come and sit in my class for ten to fifteen minutes, and their presence gives team presentations a certain flair of a major extra-curricular event.

3. Practice mindful reading

It is obvious that besides playing to students' strengths, we, as educators, should also pay attention to their weaknesses. One of those in an online-taught student is inability to stay focused on a certain topic and give a deep thought to the task at hand. This sort of fast superfluous internet-knows-it-all mindset [2, p. 31] is problematic within the realm of knowledge acquisition no matter what subject is being discussed.

We are sure that different teachers of various subjects may find their own ways to "slow" their students down a bit and have them consciously process and analyze information rather than just accept its presence. What I find helpful within a realm of an English class is mindful reading. This kind of task centers upon students' processing a piece of prose or a poem they read and personalizing or actualizing target content the way they see fit [6, p. 72].

In order to set this task, first of all we need to find a certain extract that students will be reading in our class. The extract does not need to be long, and the language of the extract should, of course, be graded depending on the average language skill of your class. Practice shows that descriptive and introspective texts fit mindful reading exercises better than fast-paced action-charged ones.

Print the text you plan to read with your class so that every student has a copy, and ask students to read it silently for one time. Poll for comprehension and develop a focused discussion. Center your class on “Why” questions and aim at having students imagine themselves either in the place described in the extract or in the emotional state of a person the extract talks about. Once initial comprehension and analysis is complete, remove any vocabulary difficulties that may arise. Put the new words on the board for students’ further reference and make it clear that visualization and empathy are more important in this exercise than complete understanding of the text.

Once all students are on the same wavelength, have them interpret the passage in a non-verbal way. Either have them draw the scene described in the text on the same piece of paper that the text is printed on, or have them mime the emotional state that the story conveys.

After processing and personalizing the content of the article you chose for this exercise, have students write the continuation of the text they had just studied. Set a limit of five to seven sentences, and let students use their imagination and practice their writing skill at the same time. Collect their papers, correct their writing, and redistribute the papers in such a way that each student has someone else’s piece. Have students read their classmates’ writing and give feedback on what they read. Guide students to giving positive feedback and have them thank each contributor for their writing, no matter how many mistakes they made.

This exercise not only targets students’ reading and writing skills, but also provides them with a possibility to “stand and stare” – it enhances their critical thinking ability and provides them with an opportunity to connect with their classmates on a whole new level. In a word, it is relaxing, involving, and therapeutic.

4. Meditation isn’t that esoteric

Mindful reading that we mentioned above is great for those classes where the students are on that level of language mastery that allows them to interact with a meaningful text in a multimodal way. Yet the question is: what do we do with a group of bored agitated young learners who are not yet quite there?

How does one bring their students’ minds back to class and gets through the white noise of memes and chatter? How do you do that with beginner students, whose language ability does not yet let them read complex narratives?

One way to do that is to set up a rule according to which everyone engages in a brief meditation session at the beginning of class. Having worked with diagnosed ADHD and autistic individuals, I can attest to the immense benefit of this activity. Not only does it add novelty to class process (not many teachers do that after all), but it also serves as a great calm-down buffer for those students who are a bit too rigid to shift from an agitated pre-class break mode to a mindful one. [8, p. 65]

Ask your students to sit and relax. Teach them a basic breathing technique - you breath in whilst counting from one to four, and you breath out on the same one-to-four

count. Have your students close their eyes and breathe deeply. Play some sounds of nature or white noise from your smartphone or through a speaker system if your classroom is equipped with one. Have students stay in this calming trance-like state for three to five minutes, and finish your meditation session by decreasing the volume of the sound you play for them. Start your lesson slowly and pick up pace as the class progresses.

This focusing technique helps students gain the sense of “being in the moment” or being mindfully present, and offers them an opportunity to subconsciously rid their minds of modern white noise distractions, such as a constant craving for newsfeed scroll or whatever the latest Snapchat trend is.

5. Empty them up

Since modern media environment has long forgone non-invasive ethos, it is fair to say that contemporary people exist in a constant state of information overload. Apparently, many, if not all of young students subject themselves to this information bombardment voluntarily for different reasons, but the outcome is the same – they need to expel this information they had previously gorged upon.

Simply put, once you receive a certain amount of information, you have a strong urge to share approximately the same amount of information. There is a gentle balance between receptive and productive properties of human brain, and in order to keep this balance maintained, information should be “moved around.” This leads to the so-called “shitposting,” [4, p. 57] reposting, recursive threads on Reddit and, also, non-controlled verbal communication of little to no value.

A good example would be a student who is using only junk words and interjections when trying to communicate something extremely trivial in their native language or in English. This person would say things like “kind of ... errr ... well ... you know ... LOL ... hehehehe ... right” without getting to the subject matter of the discussion, often losing the subject or completely failing to follow the development of their own narrative. There are a number of reasons to this sudden lingual inability ranging from an agitated state of mind when you have so much to say, but you just can’t say all the words at once, down to the desire to follow modern teenage TikTok tendencies which, unfortunately, seem to glorify stupidity and laziness.

This kind of communicative behavior is usually extremely annoying for the teachers (which is actually yet another reason for some of the students to talk this way), and a standard pedagogical behavior would most likely be to “prod” such a tongue-tied student, finishing their sentences and eliciting a coherent answer of any form. That is a natural teacher’s response occurring within strict confinements of class context, which presuppose strict temporal and disciplinary limits.

Yet there is a different way to work with those “TikTok students.” Practical psychologists have a well-known adage which goes along the lines of “you can not put information into your client’s mind without “emptying” your client’s mind first.” [3, p. 102] That signature “shrink talk” in which a patient is asked to share, and a psy-

chologist is listening to them, is indeed an attempt to drain the patient of things to say in order to make them more receptive to the things a psychologist would want them to hear.

The same approach works well in class, when a student is willing to share information, but is unable to string a coherent narrative together. An example from my teaching practice would be this teenage student with this TikTok mindset. Let us call her Lina so that my story is personalized rather than generically faceless. So, Lina comes to class and starts blurting the following string of utterances out: “I say ... saw ... big not big ... but not really big ... like horse ... yes ... aargh ... I don’t know how to say.” Apparently, Lina is excited and is willing to share something in English, she just needs to put her sentence together. So instead of guessing it and saying that very sentence for Lina, thusly giving her a false impression that people would understand her should she talk this way, I wait for Lina to finish her convoluted text. She does so in about 30 seconds and catches a breath. Now the classroom is quiet - Lina has said whatever she wanted, and I haven’t spoken yet. This moment of silence is a communicative break which signifies the transition to meaningful communication for both Lina and me.

I ask Lina to draw what she saw on the board. So Lina draws a horse. I ask Lina to describe that horse. Lina says it was big. I go to the board and write a complete subject – predicate – object sentence on the board, incorporating Lina’s horse picture in it. It looks like “I saw a big horse on the road.” I point at the sentence and ask Lina to tell us what she had seen on the road to school again. Lina goes “I saw a big horse on the road. On my way to school.”

I consider that to be a small victory over grammatical chaos in Lina’s head. We started our lesson on a positive note, and Lina gained an understanding of what a typical sentence sounds like.

Apparently, this approach is feasible with smaller student groups, since it is fairly time-consuming, and, as we all know, class time goes fast. Yet should you have a chance to “empty” your student first, make them listen, and have them produce a certain language unit after that, I suggest you use it for your student’s benefit.

To sum up, the students we are expecting at schools after pandemic lockdowns are over, are the students with a different view on education process. They are the students with a mindset framed by video games, massive online presence, and everything “meta.” If we take that into consideration, we will understand why our regular classes at brick-and-mortar schools might seem one-dimensional, inactive and boring to them. Once we get an insight into how their mind is wired, and what their values are, it will be much easier for us to adapt our rigid classes to the new paradigm those students bring to schools all over the world.

Keeping that in mind, we may see that the approaches mentioned in this article are applicable not only in an English language class. They are adaptable and scalable for pretty much any curriculum and any class size. You may want to have a lecture hall meditating before your talk, or you may need to allocate that TikTok task to an individual student of yours.

I hope this article is of help to those educators who will be the first ones to welcome students back to schools, universities and training centers after the world-wide education shifts back to its status quo ante.

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УДК 378 – 054.6 + 811

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Постпандемийная адаптация обучающихся в рамках иноязычного образования в неязыковом вузе

В статье анализируется ситуация с преподаванием иностранных языков в неязыковом вузе в период возвращения к обычному, «живому» формату обучения и обосновывается необходимость усиления двигательной составляющей занятия через интерактивные здоровьесберегающие методы и технологии.

Ключевые слова: иностранный язык в вузе, интерактивные методы обучения, двигательная активность, дистанционное обучение, здоровьесберегающие технологии, язык тела

Целью настоящей статьи является анализ ситуации с преподаванием иностранных языков (ИЯ) в неязыковом вузе в период возвращения к обычному, не виртуальному формату обучения и обоснование необходимости усиления двигательной и невербальной составляющих занятия.

Преподаватели-практики, медики, психологи единодушны в том, что значимыми негативными последствиями длительного дистанционного обуче-