

BLENDING LEARNING MODEL OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE FOR CHINESE STUDENTS

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Abstract. The paper explores the linguo-didactic possibilities of using a blended learning model of Russian as a foreign language in post-pandemic conditions. The authors propose an innovative model of blended learning on the basis of the Chinese app WeChat and justify the latter's advantages compared with other applications: a wide range of functions, a high degree of interactivity, openness and a free access to various open e-learning resources designed for Russian as a foreign language and the providing of high motivation of Chinese students for learning Russian.

Four problems have been identified: low effectiveness in implementing the ideas of blended learning, a lack of electronic teaching resources, a low level of technological training of the learning process participants and the low efficiency of the existing blended learning models. A definition is given of the concept of blended learning in post-pandemic conditions. The paper presents a didactic design of the learning process using a blended learning model of Russian as a foreign language developed on the basis of the WeChat platform: Block 1 – materials posted in a WeChat public account; Block 2 – materials posted in a public account and using the Bilibili mini-program in WeChat, Block 3 – material intended for learning in the lesson (partial use of WeChat) and Block 4 – a chat using a videocall in WeChat.

The paper identifies stages of work within the blended learning model: the initial stage of learning content development; the stage of classroom differentiation and modification of the teaching materials; the stage of implementing the blended learning model; the stage of correcting and improving the model. The use of WeChat for teaching Russian to Chinese students allows organizing the learning process for this group of students more effectively, increasing the students' motivation and ensuring the durability of knowledge, skills and competencies in different kinds of language behaviour. It has been proved that the technical characteristics of WeChat make it possible to substantially reduce the time spent on posting the learning content.

Key words: blended learning; learning model; traditional learning; online learning; WeChat; Russian as a foreign language

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МОДЕЛЬ СМЕШАННОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ КИТАЙСКИХ СТУДЕНТОВ РУССКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ

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Аннотация. В статье исследуются лингводидактические возможности применения модели смешанного обучения русскому языку как иностранному (ПКИ) в условиях постпандемии. Предлагается инновационная модель смешанного обучения на основе разработанного в Китае приложения WeChat и обоснована.

выявляются его преимущества по сравнению с другими приложениями: широкий набор функций, высокая степень интерактивности, открытость и свободный доступ к разнообразным открытым обучающим электронным ресурсам, предназначенным для обучения русскому языку как иностранному, обеспечение высокой мотивированности китайских учащихся в изучении русского языка.

Выявлены 4 проблемы: низкая продуктивность при реализации идей смешанного обучения, дефицит электронных обучающих ресурсов, низкий уровень технологической подготовки субъектов учебного процесса и низкий коэффициент действенности существующих моделей смешанного обучения. Дано определение понятия смешанного обучения в условиях постпандемии. Представлен дидактический дизайн учебного процесса с использованием модели смешанного обучения РКИ, разработанной на основе платформы WeChat: Блок 1 – материалы, размещенные в публичном аккаунте WeChat; Блок 2 – материалы, размещенные в публичном аккаунте, и использование мини-программы Bilibili в WeChat, Блок 3 – материал, предназначенный для изучения на уроке (частичное использование WeChat), и Блок 4 – беседа с использованием видеозвонка в WeChat.

В статье определены этапы работы в рамках смешанного обучения: этап первичного формирования учебного контента; этап дифференциации учащихся и модификации учебных материалов; этап реализации модели смешанного обучения РКИ; этап корректирования и совершенствования модели смешанного обучения РКИ. Приводятся примеры заданий, разработанных на платформе WeChat. Использование WeChat при обучении китайских студентов русскому языку позволяет более эффективно организовать учебный процесс для данного контингента учащихся, повысить мотивацию студентов и обеспечить прочность знаний, навыков и умений в разных видах речевой деятельности. Доказано, что технические характеристики WeChat дают возможность максимально снизить временные затраты на размещение обучающего контента.

Ключевые слова: смешанное обучение; модель обучения; традиционное обучение; онлайн-обучение; WeChat; русский язык как иностранный

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Introduction. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented global crisis in the modern world. There are reasons to believe that it will accelerate many processes taking place in society, which will, in one way or another, lead to certain transformations in various fields of life. The measures taken for the prevention and control of the epidemic have pervaded all the spheres of human activity, including education. The coronavirus has posed many challenges for the traditional classroom learning, but at the same time has created new unique opportunities for evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning models, in particular, those for learning foreign languages.

In recent years, the theory and methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language are undergoing significant change influenced by latest information technology innovations and 5-G network. Following the pandemic, a trend has emerged towards a gradual replacement of the traditional models of learning Russian as a foreign language by blended learning ones. In the last five years, especially since 2020, issues concerning teaching Russian as a foreign language in the paradigm of blended learning have had continuing relevance.

The aim of the article is to reveal the linguo-didactic potential of the WeChat platform for teaching the Russian language to Chinese students and to develop a blended learning model of Russian as a foreign language (BLR model) in post-pandemic conditions. The study uses the analytic-synthetic method (analysis of approaches and points of view), the method of observation (studying the conditions of teaching Russian and the learning process), the communicative-pragmatic method (studying the particular features of communication in a foreign language in the context of blended learning) and modelling (developing a model of blended learning).

Blended learning of Russian as a foreign language in a pandemic: current problems

According to the classical definition, blended learning is the disruptive option and an educational technology that combines teacher-assisted learning (face-to-face) with online learning and involves the student control over the path, place, time and pace of learning, as well as the integration of the learning experience with the teacher and online [Horn & Staker 2011; Christensen et al. 2013].

The process of adopting and developing blended learning has not been an easy one. Studying the history of implementing blended learning in Russia and abroad in the last ten years shows that it rapidly develops in the universities of many countries.

Innovative models have been proposed, for example, the cyclic model of blended learning [Baydikova 2020], a model of mobile learning [Kasatkina 2017; Samosenkova et al. 2019], a model of blended learning using artificial intelligence (based on a Chatbot) [Bikkulova & Ivkina 2021; Al-Qaysi et al. 2019], etc.

However, new approaches have now emerged in the field of education that criticize and throw doubt on blended learning. This is due to a number of problems that have arisen in the process of implementing blended learning with the spreading of coronavirus infection.

During quarantine period, almost all universities faced new challenges, which made many of them change completely to online learning or to a mixture of online and offline learning and move the learning process from the classroom to the virtual medium. As a result, several flaws were revealed in the models of blended learning. Thus, according to K. Schwab and Th. Malleret, even before the outburst of the pandemic there had been certain risks that could not be eliminated, and the spreading of coronavirus only increased these risks [Schwab 2020: 7].

Analysis of a number of works on the problems of blended learning has revealed four problems:

1. Low effectiveness in implementing the ideas of blended learning

The most serious problem that occurs when a BLR model is used during quarantine is its low effectiveness, which is due to a number of factors: a lack of high-speed Internet connection, ineffective use of the information technologies' didactic potential, teachers' conservatism, etc.

2. A lack of electronic teaching resources

Before Covid-19, the development of online resources for teaching Russian as a foreign language had been at the beginning stage; besides, there was a lack of high-quality electronic teaching resources that could provide the effectiveness of the learning process, for a majority of subjects.

3. A low level of technological training of the learning process participants

Although various creative models of blended learning have long been used in different educational systems, they are not yet sufficiently widespread in the universities of Russia. The lack of mastery of technological skills by teachers and learners makes it difficult for them to adapt themselves to the new learning environment in a short time. The majority of teachers have not yet gained sufficient experience of blended learning, they have a vague idea of what techniques are best suited for this kind of learning.

4. Low efficiency of blended learning models

The recent years have seen the development of innovative methods and technologies of blended learning. However, research in methodology and our experience show that a small number of those who teach Russian as a foreign language use blended learning models, or they use only elements of these models. This is due to several reasons, the main of which, in our opinion, is expense and too high demands on time, which made a certain number of teachers and students sceptical about introducing new models of blended learning and led to internal psychological resistance to their practical implementation. Compared with the traditional model of learning, many blended learning models are not easy to adapt to different learning environments, or to different subjects. Blended learning places greater demands on the learning process and increases the load of both students and teachers. On the one hand, because of the extremely heavy strain and intensity of classes the teacher finds it difficult to apply individual approach in the classroom. On the other hand, the student has to spend much more time on learning a subject and doing work as an independent learner at home, which can lead to stress in the new conditions that the student is not accustomed to. It is our belief that although in this situation the student's performance might improve, this does not necessarily result from the use of a blended learning model, and thus can hardly serve as something that proves the dependence of students' performance on the model of learning.

Among the problems mentioned above, one that is the most pressing is the didactic design of BLR models. The world has now entered a post-pandemic period, which is characterized by instability, disturbance, complexity and an uncertain future, so that at any moment something may disrupt the normal course of learning. In our view,

one of the possible ways of solving this problem might be a blended learning technology [Fedotova & Yan Ruytin 2021].

Works dealing with blended learning models are numerous and varied [Kachalova et al. 2021; Blinov et al. 2021; Agustin R. Veras 2017]. However, there is no reason to claim that all the problems have been solved. Thus, as far as designing blended learning models is concerned, there is no type (such as, for instance, the flipped classroom type) that could be used for teaching different subjects. Most of the existing models of blended learning are rigid, they lack flexibility, and their practical implementation seldom takes into consideration the psychological condition or the emotional state of students, or their national characteristics.

One can claim that it is currently relevant to develop a workable BLR model and design learning activities based on this model. The model should not only be efficient but also allow one to control the amount of psychological pressure on the student.

Developing BLR models in the post-pandemic period

When one is developing a new BLR model, the main difficulty lies in defining the concept “blended learning” in the post-pandemic period.

There is still a lack of common understanding of the term “blended learning”. In the wider sense, the majority of researchers see it as an agglomeration of different theories of learning, means of learning, models of learning, etc. Analysis of works shows that in defining blended learning Russian educationalists focus on combining the strong points of traditional classroom learning and online learning [Belovodskaya 2012; Bekisheva 2016].

In defining the concept of blended learning in the post-pandemic period we would like to emphasize that there is no fixed format (best possible relationship of classroom learning to online learning) for such kind of learning. What is important is that a blended learning model contribute to effective knowledge acquisition and the development of durable skills. Consequently, a crucial feature of blended learning is its flexibility. When an accepted BLR model cannot adapt to changing situations of learning, its successful use will be in question. In the post-pandemic period, the first factor to take into consideration in implemen-

ting blended learning models is the instability of the learning environment. Even if one or another model is accepted, the blueprint for organizing the learning process can suddenly be disrupted by social factors that have not been provided for. To ensure the effectiveness of teaching, a model should work in such a way that both teachers and learners can promptly and adequately respond to possible changes in the learning process. Practice-based approach to learning foreign languages can also be implemented through the Internet, so compared with the corresponding models of teaching other subjects the BLR model does not have precisely specified requirements for the proportion of autonomous practical classes; besides, the main teaching materials can be used either offline or online, which testifies to the flexibility of the model.

In this connection it can be assumed that in the post-pandemic period blended learning of Russian as a foreign language should strike a balance between classroom learning and online learning. In the actual process of learning, this model will constantly change depending on the social environment (for example, the deterioration or improvement of the epidemiological situation), the learners' degree of adaptation, the degree of intensiveness of the program and other factors.

Thus, in post-pandemic conditions, the BLR model is understood as a flexible model of learning Russian as a foreign language with a constantly changing relative proportion of different learning formats, one of which predominates in a given period depending on the epidemiological situation and the psychological state of the learners.

Advantages of a blended learning model based on WeChat platform

Implementing a model of blended learning requires one or a combination of several technology supports as auxiliary training tools that allow one to organize the learning process in the most effective and flexible way and realize the potential of various forms of integrating the learning process participants. In this case, the teacher's first task is to select the suitable tools and combine their didactic potential in the best possible way.

To achieve the goal of greater integration, the promotion of high quality learning resources and equality of education, it becomes necessary to use a learning platform or a mobile app characterized

by openness and offering foreign students access to various open resources for learning Russian. These requirements are matched by WeChat, an app that is the most popular among the Chinese.

WeChat is a free multi-purpose app developed by Tencent company in 2011 to provide messaging services. In 2021, the number of active WeChat users exceeded 12 billion people. WeChat provides text messaging, voice messaging and video conferencing not only between individuals, but also between groups of people.

The first research papers on the use of WeChat in blended learning were published as early as 2012. Because of the rapid improvements in mobile apps, WeChat is now used not only as a messaging app. It successfully integrates various resources and has built its own ecosystem with a wide range of functions, the same as those of VK, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Google pay, TikTok, AliExpress and many other apps. Also, research is in progress on blended learning models of foreign languages using WeChat [Antropova 2018].

It is appropriate to integrate WeChat into the blended learning process of Russian as a foreign language for a number of reasons:

1. WeChat has a highly interactive character, which online learning is obviously lacking in. Given that Chinese students regularly use WeChat for various purposes, we believe that this app is quite suitable for widening the channels of interaction between the participants of the learning process.

2. The functions of the public account and mini programs built into WeChat can be used as a network shell for storing, posting and disseminating information and integrating learning resources. WeChat allows teachers and learners to easily combine all the existing learning resources they find useful into a single database and post them on the Internet free of charge, including materials for classroom, online and independent learning.

3. Using WeChat in the process of blended learning of Russian as a foreign language allows saving the time required for developing a new platform for posting open information, consequently learners' motivation is enhanced significantly.

In view of the above, it is our suggestion that WeChat be used as technical support for organi-

zing online learning and promoting independent learning in implementing the BLR model.

Didactic design of the BLR model using WeChat

Based on the definition of the term "blended learning in the post-pandemic period" one can tackle the task of designing the learning process. The BLR model using WeChat that we propose for Chinese students (Level B1) will allow increasing the quality and effectiveness of teaching.

As is known, management of the learning process is performed in stages [Orlov 1988]. Our model involves four stages:

- I. Initial development of learning content.

- II. Classroom differentiation and modification of the teaching materials.

- III. Implementing the BLR model.

- IV. Correcting and improving the model.

In every stage, the learning content is determined by teachers depending on their specific learning goal and objectives.

Let us discuss each of the stages in greater detail.

I. Initial development of learning content.

Nowadays many researchers admit the complex multi-level nature of the blended learning model: it is a system consisting of several components seen as parameters of the learning model [Gvozdeva 2020; Graham 2006; Singh 2001]. In the first stage, the teacher analyzes the content of the course as a whole and the learning strategies of the students, identifies factors that impede the acquisition of the knowledge and skills which form the basis of the learning content.

The teacher's main methodological tasks are as follows:

- 1) defining the overall goal of teaching the course;

- 2) preliminary collection and analysis of authentic teaching material, incorporating it into the plan of the lesson in accordance with the goal thereof, determining the workable volume of the material and the time needed for fulfilling the learning objectives in the classroom and online;

- 3) getting acquainted with the ways of using WeChat and its functions, creating a public account, posting the necessary electronic learning resources on the public account and in the mini programs of WeChat and their integration.

II. Classroom differentiation and modification of the teaching materials.

There is no doubt that the teacher’s adequate assessment of the individual qualities and needs of every student is extremely important for blended learning of Russian as a foreign language to be successful. It is essential to differentiate the classroom using parameters that determine whether language acquisition in blended learning conditions will be successful and whether the knowledge and skills acquired will be durable.

Thus, before the first class the teacher should become acquainted with every student using a survey (WeChat mini-program Questionnaire Star), a placement test to assess the level of skills in the Russian language, and a one-to-one chat by

means of a video call in WeChat. This will allow the teacher to fulfill the following tasks:

- 1) establish the students’ motivation for learning Russian and their interests outside the classroom;
- 2) find out the students’ professional interests;
- 3) reveal the students’ attitude to classroom learning, online learning and blended learning;
- 4) find out the volume and structure of the students’ knowledge of the language, in particular, gaps in their knowledge;
- 5) gauge the students’ capacity for autonomous learning, the degree of self-discipline and personal responsibility;
- 6) devise an individual education plan for independent work of every student (see Table 1).

Table 1. Using WeChat to Differentiate Students and Modify Learning Content

TYPES OF WORK	PARAMETERS TO BE MEASURED	SUPPLEMENTARY MOBILE FEATURES	OBJECTIVE
Testing	Volume and structure of language knowledge	Mini-program Questionnaire Star in WeChat WeChat video call	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devising an individual plan for independent work • Modification of learning content
Survey One-to-one chat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • motivation and interests • emotional attitude to learning formats • degree of self-discipline and responsibility • capacity for autonomous learning • future professional prospects 		

Based on the analysis of the information obtained the teacher can define specific learning goals and objectives, put students in mini-groups and modify the content of the learning materials, devise a plan for working with these materials, select electronic learning resources taking into consideration individual psychological traits of every student.

It is worth noting that the establishment of a positive correlation between the students’ performance and motivation, the analysis of their motivational sphere and the identification of the prime motive are among the most important conditions for implementing blended learning of Russian as a foreign language.

At this stage, it is important to determine the students’ emotional attitude to studies. We share the point of view expressed by I. A. Zimnyaya that if the learning material itself or the process of its perception and remembering inspires a feeling of

joy or satisfaction, this creates psychological conditions for effective acquisition [Zimnyaya 1991]. In other words, the transformation of passive learning into active learning occurs only when conditions are created for a positive emotional attitude to acquiring the Russian language.

Besides, based on the principle of goal-setting one can claim that building motivation through setting the goals of learning activity is a productive educational action ensuring high quality of learning. An individual learning plan helps the student to concentrate on studies, work persistently and enthusiastically on the learning material and achieve the goal set.

III. Implementing the BLR model.

At this stage, students are expected to work using prepared learning materials provided as three separate presentations that the students can get access to by entering a keyword in a WeChat public account (see Table 2).

Table 2. Relationship of Blended Learning Model Blocks and Presentations

PRESENTATION 1 (PRE-CLASSROOM WORK)		PRESENTATION 2 (CLASSROOM WORK)	PRESENTATION 3 (ONLINE LESSON)
Block 1	Block 2	Block 3	Block 4
Public account WeChat	Public account and mini-program Bilibili in WeChat	Material to be studied in the classroom	Videocall WeChat

These presentations include problem-based activities. We would like to emphasize that at this stage, for the purpose of building phonetic skills in Russian, learners perform some of the home activities orally and under asynchronous control of the teacher, which allows the teacher to make timely diagnosis of the learners' language problems, in particular, phonetic problems, and creates further conditions for the interaction between the teacher and the learners. For example:

Activity 1: Прочитайте слова и словосочетания, запишите чтение и пришлите преподавателю голосовыми сообщениями в чат WeChat.

To develop listening skills, video activities are included, links to which are sent to students in the form of QR-codes. Learners scan the QR-code to watch a video episode in the WeChat mini-program Bilibili. A special function of this mini-program is the posting of Danmu. Danmu is a type of video comment, with viewers' comments overlaid directly on top of the video as it is playing, which makes it possible to combine watching video with a simultaneous exchange of comments. Owing to this function, the teacher will be able to know what problems the learners encounter and what is difficult for them to understand as they are watching.

Presentation 1, which consists of Blocks 1 and 2, is developed for pre-classroom independent learning

Block 1 presents the grammar part of the lesson. The activities are based on the principles of problem-based learning. The formation of independent cognitive activity in the process of verbal interaction is one of the most important learning objectives. However, in the traditional model of teaching Russian as a foreign language, a great dependence of the student on the student's book and the teacher is evident. Block 1 provides authentic examples from video clips or textual materials from other blocks, learners formulate grammar rules themselves based on the contexts suggested, solve learning problems suggested by

the teacher, which lays the foundations for durable acquisition of knowledge in the topic being studied. When learners face difficulties, they will be able to type in key terms (for example, 'complex sentences with attributive clauses') in a WeChat public account and receive a link to a micro video lesson that contains an explanation of the grammar focus that the teacher found on the Internet or recorded themselves. It is worth noting that the public account is open for recording not only to students of a particular group, it is open to everybody, which makes it possible to disseminate learning resources.

Block 2 is an introduction to the lesson. The main objective of this block is to stimulate the learners' interest in the new topic and to lay the foundations for the practical use of the Russian language in the classroom. This block includes work on pronunciation, vocabulary, developing listening and reading skills. By doing various activities students acquaint themselves with grammar features and vocabulary items of the language they study, practice using them in different communicative situations and in different forms of communication.

Presentation 2 (classroom work). The activities in presentation 2 are more practice-oriented than the pre-classroom ones. Students perform the activities using the language knowledge obtained and the skills developed. Such activities can also be professionally oriented. For example:

Activity 2: Представьте, что Вы окончили университет и теперь Вам нужно искать работу в России. Выберите один из предложенных сайтов, составьте свое резюме. Отправьте свое резюме преподавателю через WeChat.

Activity 3: Отсканируйте QR-код, посмотрите видео 3, кратко опишите, как проходит собеседование (аудиозапись монолога пришлите преподавателю через WeChat).

Presentation 3 provides learning materials for an online lesson using WeChat. In this block, a complex objective is set – to practice using

vocabulary and grammatical structures in communicative situations of learning, consolidate the material studied and control the level of formation of skills and competencies within a particular topic. One can claim that durable acquisition of learning material by students is ensured by the students' awareness of the professional prospects of using the language studied. For foreign students, the Russian language is not just a medium of instruction for courses taught in this language, it prepares them for adaptation in the post-information society, where intellect is the dominant force. The ability to seek information actively and consciously, absorb and analyze the information obtained and solve various problems effectively is extremely important for a university graduate. Thus, in teaching Russian as a foreign language it is important to create conditions for students to have an opportunity to use the language knowledge obtained in solving specific problems that they can encounter in their future career. The teacher gives students the task to prepare within a specified period of time for a learning activity, e. g., a role play "Making a CV and preparing for an interview", on their own or in a group. Then the students work in pairs while the teacher monitors, evaluates the communication tactics used and draws conclusions based on the results obtained.

IV. Correcting and improving the learning model.

At this stage, the teacher's task is to make a comprehensive evaluation of the learners' achievements by the following parameters:

1. The quality of implementing the individual learning plan (25%).
2. Performing pre-classroom activities and home activities for classroom work (25%).
3. Being active in the classroom (10%) and in online lessons (30%).

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4. Results of the final assessment (10%).

After that, in order to further improve the model of learning, the teacher should conduct a survey and have a discussion with students during the last lesson so as to find out their attitude to this model of learning.

Conclusions. Blended learning is one of the main directions of the reform of education and teaching foreign languages in the modern information society. This learning format can introduce changes to the learning process due to the modification of the traditional approaches to off-line learning, application of the principle of individualization and raising the quality of training future professionals. The study conducted shows that blended learning holds promise for improving the performance of Chinese students. The didactic potential of WeChat opens up many possibilities for teaching Russian as a foreign language. WeChat gives students regular free access to authentic learning material, which contributes, on the one hand, to the development and deep integration of electronic learning resources and, on the other hand, to increasing the students' motivation for learning the Russian language. The main advantage and distinctive feature of a BLR model using WeChat is optimization of the learning process in terms of interiorization and exteriorization. The WeChat app offers a greater number of alternative forms of applying knowledge of the language not only in learning situations, but also in various real-life communicative situations, allows students to meet their cognitive needs and contributes to better outcomes in teaching the Russian language.

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