

Distant Culture in Foreign Language Learning: How to Avoid Social Distancing? / A cultura da distância na aprendizagem de língua estrangeira: como evitar o distanciamento social?

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the issues of distance learning in foreign languages. The urgency of which was aroused by the covid-19 pandemic led to the rapid transition of most Russian universities to a distance learning format. The article discusses the opportunities and difficulties encountered during the transition. One of the main problems is the increase of social distancing between teacher and students, caused by the lack of co-presence in the online foreign language classes, which are known by their communication and practical orientation. The article outlines possible ways to counterbalance this problem.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic; Distance Learning; Social Distancing; Foreign Language; Co-presence

RESUMO

O artigo trata de algumas questões da aprendizagem a distância de línguas estrangeiras, cuja urgência foi provocada pela pandemia da covid-19, o que levou à rápida transição da maioria das universidades russas para um formato de ensino a distância. O artigo discute oportunidades e dificuldades encontradas durante a transição. Um dos principais problemas é o aumento da distância social entre o professor e o aluno, causada pela falta de copresença nas aulas de línguas estrangeiras online, que se distinguem pela sua comunicação e orientação prática. O artigo descreve possíveis maneiras de contrabalançar esse problema.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Pandemia; Aprendizagem a distância; Distância social; Língua estrangeira; Copresença*

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Introduction

In 2020, a new era has begun not only in world history, but also in education. The urgent transition to distance learning affected everyone: both teachers and students. And despite the fact that talks about the formation of a digital society have been going on for more than a decade, the world turned out to be not ready for the “remoteness.”

The idea of distance learning is not new; the so-called “correspondence education” (i.e., learning by mail) appeared in the middle of the 18th century. As technology and communication capabilities evolved from radio to television, and finally to the Internet, so did the channels for distance learning.

In Europe and the USA, distance and blended learning research have been conducted since the middle of the last century. In Russia, the beginning of the “era of distance learning” dates to May 31st, 1995, with the ratification of The Concept of Creating and Developing a Unified Education System in Russia.¹

A significant amount of scientific research, both foreign and Russian, is dedicated to the topic technologies for distance education (Kearsley, 2001; Andreev, 2003; Gavrikov, 2001; Gershunskij, 1998; Gospodarik, 2000; Moiseeva, 2004; Polat, 2007; Hutorskoj, 2007).

Theoretical and methodological principles of distance learning are reflected in the works of Andreev (2003), Solovov (2006), Tikhomirov (1998), Shchennikov (2002) and others. In addition, there is a significant amount of research describing the principles of distance learning in specific disciplines (Gospodarik, 2000; Polat, 2007 and others) or in specific conditions (Batarshev, 1999 and others).

Despite the considerable research base, the education system was unprepared for the transition to distance learning with the psychological factor appearing as the primary obstacle. Most of the teachers and instructors turned out to be far from understanding the principles of distance learning. Moreover, the educational system itself was not sufficiently equipped with adequate technology suitable for the new conditions.

¹“Kontseptsiya sozdaniya i razvitiya edinoj sistemy obrazovaniya v Rossii” (The Concept of Creating and Developing a Unified Education System in Russia), approved by the decree of the State Committee of the Russian Federation for Higher Education No. 6 dated May 31, 1995. Available at: <http://www.dstu.edu.ru/ntb/sour/distobr.htm>. Access on: 05 September 5 2020.

Since March 2020, the Russian education system has gone through the 5 stages of the Kübler-Ross model (Kubler-Ross, 2006). Starting from the denial of the new system (“this cannot be happening”) it moved to anger (“nothing works”), bargaining (“I can lecture small groups remotely, but I cannot lead seminars for large classes”), and depression (“distance learning is a waste of time”) and, finally, it culminated with acceptance (“there are ways to work effectively, you just need to find them”).

Today, it can be concluded that the Russian education system has adopted distance learning as a fact of life and a perspective for development, especially during the ongoing pandemic. However, the question of adapting distance learning to the real needs of education (especially language education, which is distinguished by its practical orientation) remains open.

How to organize education “remotely” to overcome social distancing? What is the culture of distance communication and how to ensure effective intercultural communication (which is the goal of teaching any foreign language) in the new format? The object of this article is to address these questions.

1 At a Distance: The Experience of Russian Higher Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Speaking about the transition to distance learning, Russia was not the only country which faced difficulties in the process. According to a survey by Barnes & Noble, 60% of US students were ready for distance learning. However, the College Reaction/Axios survey showed 77% of students considered such education to be worse than the traditional one. Only about 20 UK universities were ready to go online, Tim O’Shea (the country’s leading distance learning specialist) told The Guardian. In the University and College Union survey, more than 20% of applicants for undergraduate programs in the UK plan to postpone their admission to the next year if universities do not return to their usual format by September 2020. High school and college students in India protested against taking exams online due to the insufficient level of technical support and the unpreparedness of students for exams (they did not have time to master the curriculum).

The University of Delhi reported 85% of the university's more than 50,000 students would not be able to take exams online.²

As noted above, the existing scientific research base was of little help in the initial stages of the transition to distance learning in Russia as well. The unprecedented speed, at which the change was required, simply did not allow the educators to familiarize themselves with the theory of distance learning. It is unlikely that the first step for an educator previously unfamiliar with the distance learning methodology, but facing the inevitability of teaching online starting tomorrow, would be to study scientific literature. In this regard, the first weeks, or even months of the transition to the remote format, were more like attempts to simply transfer the existing classroom practices to a virtual online conference. And only later did the teachers have time to share their experience.

Based on the results of more than six months of distance work, Russian teachers and students have identified a list of pros and cons of the new system. Below is the summary of such findings along with suggested counterpoints.

- *Flexibility of learning.* Students note that among the primary advantages of distance learning is the ability to plan their time to get better results (53.0%) and improve their self-management skills (52.5%). However, to maximize the benefits of these opportunities, students should have certain abilities related to self and time management.
- *Removal of the psychological block.* Several teachers reported instances where students previously shy and withdrawn from class activities began to take an active part in online classes and participate in discussions. Being at home in front of a gadget screen surrounded by familiar things made those students feel psychologically more comfortable.³ On the other hand, many students may have perceived such a distant setting as a barrier. According to analyzed data, about a third of university students feel uncomfortable when a teacher asks them to turn on a webcam. Besides that 35% of students found it difficult to ask a teacher questions in a distance learning environment. Researchers observed that these changes in students' reactions can be linked to a change in perception of the verbal and non-verbal communication via an online medium.⁴

² Distantcionnoe obrazovanie [Distance Education], 2020. RAEX. Available at: https://raex-a.ru/researches/distance_education/2020. Access on: 05 September 2020.

³ Trudnosti na distantsii [Difficulties in the Distance]. *Kommersant*. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4307297>. Access on: 06 September 2020.

⁴ Uroki «stress-testa». Vuzy v usloviyakh pandemii i posle neyo. Analiticheskij doklad [Lessons from the “Stress Test.” Universities in a Pandemic and after It. Analytical Report]. *National Research Tomsk State*

• *No boundaries.* It is traditionally understood that the advantage of distance learning is the reduction (both temporal and spatial) of the distance between educator and students. In the context of Russian higher education, the problem of time difference is solved conventionally, that is, class schedules are usually based on the Moscow time fuse. Although students may find themselves in diverse time fuses (up to 10 hours of difference in relation to Moscow time), this is considered irrelevant in organizing synchronous classes.

• *Internet connection is all you need for education.* This statement raises two questions from both the teacher's and student's point of view.

Besides Internet access, teachers require not only a designated online platform but also class materials that cannot simply be taken from manuals. Those materials need to be adapted to the online format. To make the most of this technology and provide the best learning experience to their students, teachers need to master new skills to navigate the world of online education.

For the student, the central question lies with the ability to stay focused and motivated to learn as it requires much greater discipline than is the case of a non-virtual classroom. Here a short comment is necessary: an experiment carried out in 2017-2018 scientists from the Higher School of Economics (HSE) together with their American colleagues using STEM⁵ disciplines as samples indicate that online training for university students is not inferior in efficiency to offline training.⁶ On the other hand, a more recent joint study by the Center for Internal Monitoring of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) and the Institute of Education of Texas Southern University (TSU), which took place in March-April and May-June, 2020, suggests that over half of the surveyed students (65%) noted that distance learning format is less efficient than the traditional one.⁷

In the context of distance learning, the internet access also comes as only a small part, albeit central, of a larger system. To be able to learn, students require a proper place

University. Available at: http://www.tsu.ru/upload/medialibrary/add/uroki-stress_testa-vuzy-v-usloviyakh-pandemii-i-posle-nee.pdf. Access on: 17 October 2020.

⁵ This is an acronym for disciplines in the field of Sciences, Technologies, Engineering and Mathematics.

⁶ Vysshee domashnee [Higher Home Education]. *National Research University Higher School of Economics*. Available at: <https://ioe.hse.ru/news/356576166.html>. Access on: 20 September 2020.

⁷ Opros studentov rossijskikh vuzov ob usloviyakh distantsionnogo obucheniya [A Survey of Students of Russian Universities on the Conditions of Distance Learning]. *National Research University Higher School of Economics*. Available at: <https://cim.hse.ru/covidsurvey>. Access on: 11 September 2020.

to do their studies. Online studies still require students to have a desk and a sufficiently powerful computer at their disposal whenever necessary. Such a study area must also provide protection from the outside distractions in a fashion similar to that of a classroom setting at school. The last requirement is too often a luxury, which students living at home with their families simply cannot afford.

On top of all that, the underlying idea of having a reliable internet connection is not entirely solved either for some regions in Russia or for some countries. A handful of countries in the frontier economic development spectrum and many more remote areas within the more developed countries, Russia included, still struggle to establish and maintain the infrastructure necessary for the stable and widely available internet access. Yet on the flip side of the established Internet infrastructure are the state decisions to restrict specific online sources and platforms for purposes unrelated to the issues of distance learning. For example, China and Iran implemented a blanket ban on such online service providers as Google, Skype, Zoom and many more, thus rendering the educational sources stored on their platforms unusable for the population of those countries.

In May 2020, The RAEX⁸ Agency's survey found that 58.1% of students (ranging from 47.0% in the capital to 71.2% in the regions) consider tech problems, that is, from poor connection to application malfunctions, as a weak point of the education system. Only 13.6% of respondents were satisfied with the technical support of the education system.⁹

- *Saving*. Distance learning should save not only money, but also time. In practice, however, monetary savings are not always easy to achieve given the need to procure the more powerful equipment and software.

- *Insufficient level of “co-presence” (Goodyear, 2006) as well as mutual obligations of the teacher and student in relation to one another*. Quite a few activities, which would previously be considered inevitable, are no longer necessary given the lack of immediate territorial proximity or “co-presence” between the teacher and the students. Routine exercises such as rising early, dressing up for work or school, and arriving to the classroom on time have been made redundant with the rapid transition to the distance

⁸ International Group of Rating Agencies. The group has been active since 1997 and is represented in Russia, Kazakhstan, Belorussia, European Union and Hong Kong. The head office is located in Moscow. Information available at: https://raexpert.eu/about_group/. Access in June, 2021.

⁹ Distantionnoe obrazovanie [Distance Education], 2020. RAEX. Available at: https://raex-a.ru/researches/distance_education/2020. Access on: 05 September 2020.

learning. To top that most forms of contact have been truncated. Types of essential communication such as visual, auditory, and even forms of tactile contact have been severely abridged if not completely eradicated. This reduces the content load of the lesson and the role of mutual interest between the students and the teacher in the educational process, slows down or practically eliminates the potential of communicative exchange and response, and makes a free non-scripted dialogue difficult to conduct.

According to the same RAEX poll of May 2020, 70.2% of respondents feel it is too great the void created by the lack of face-to-face communication with fellow students and teachers by distance learning. 33.8% of respondents regarded the absence of such learning activities as laboratory work, workshops, etc. to be a major weakness in their education. In addition, the respondents noted a decrease in the volume of communication with the teachers (44.7% of respondents). Only 19.4% of the survey participants adhered to the opposite opinion.

The lack of co-presence, in our opinion, is especially negatively manifested in teaching foreign languages, the result of which should be the mastery of a new means of communication and knowledge of another culture. We will take a closer look at this issue in the next section of our article.

2 Presence in Distance Learning: The Specifics of the Teacher's Interaction with the Students

Why is co-presence so important when teaching foreign languages? As mentioned above, a foreign language is not only a real means of communication, but also a factor in understanding and bringing people of different cultures together and their interaction. Language is a mirror of culture, which reflects not only the objective reality, but also the social consciousness of the native speakers, their mentality, national character, lifestyle, traditions, customs, morality, value system, attitude, and vision of the world (Ter-Minasova, 2008).

Including a dialogue of cultures into the curriculum of the modern foreign language studies is an essential part in teaching the students the values and the mentality of the countries, in which the languages are natively spoken. For without the understanding of the foreign culture, the command of its language is only limited.

The methodology for the dialogue of cultures was developed in the works of Dr. M. M. Bakhtin. According to him, each culture lives only in the questioning of another culture:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. [...] Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched (Bakhtin, 1986, p.07).

So should learning be also built as a dialogue, since “only in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the “man in man” be revealed, for others as well as for oneself” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.251). Learning a foreign language is not limited to a simple transmission and reception of packaged information. It requires co-presence, in which both trust and communication skills are effectively built between students and teachers (Goodyear, 2006).

The change in the learning environment, which occurred due to the transition to distance learning, and within which the student and the teacher no longer experience the same characteristics of social presence as they did in a face-to-face settings, largely defines the socio-psychological specificity of online learning. Characteristics of social presence, in turn, can be defined as the feeling of involvement in an interpersonal interaction, which allows one to perceive a partner in an online interaction as a real person (Short, Williams, Christie, 1976). In the environment of distance learning, social presence can be further explained as a feeling of belonging to a real community regardless of the physical barriers (Tu, McIssac, 2002).

Considering its value, limiting the social presence of the teachers and students within the online learning is a risk that may lead to the diminished effectiveness of the learning outcomes.

How can this risk be mitigated? According to a number of studies, it can be done by leveraging students’ personal characteristics and above all their motivation potential (De Barba, Kennedy, Ainley, 2016).

According to Bassili (2008), research shows that students’ attitude towards online learning directly depends on their level of external motivation. In contrast, motivational

strategies for control of self-learning or learning with a teacher contribute to the preference of offline classes (Brooker, 2018, Cho, M. H., Heron, 2015; De Barba, Kennedy, Ainley, 2016; Muilenburg, Berge, 2005).

In addition, it was found that the motivation of students under the conditions of distance learning differs depending on the stage of the learning process. Thus, in the beginning of an online course, where students are expected to master the study materials on their own, student's motivation was positively correlated with their technical savvy and the sense of the course's relevance to their needs. Around the midpoint of the course, student's motivation is primarily dependent on role of the studied material in their self-education (Kim, Frick, 2011).

Wang and Baker (2015) found that students who complete an online course are primarily interested in its content, while those who drop it are initially more focused on gaining new experiences and self-development. The same conclusions apply to online group lessons (synchronous interaction).

It seems that the lack of co-presence is mostly pronounced in foreign language studies in groups of more than 5 students, the size which is standard in modern university education.

When working offline, in a classroom, the teacher has an opportunity to observe the students, read their emotional state, and tailor the teaching approach to the individual needs of students. For instance, based on where in the classroom a student chooses to sit, in front or on the back, the teacher can determine the best communication tactics for that student to improve their learning outcomes.

What happens, however, when learning is brought online? The subtle signals a student might be sending through body language or other means of non-verbal communication are more likely to elude the teacher even if the Internet connection is strong and the teacher can see the student on the screen. And then there are situations when the teacher does not see the students at all. Many students opt to switch off their cameras, so all the teacher would see is an avatar or a black square. Either way that is challenging for the teacher to gauge the students' level of engagement. This is one of the manifestations of social distancing in online learning. Besides that, not only students when staying at home are surrounded by a slew of distractions, but they also feel no

pressing need to engage with the lessons (that responsibility can always be shifted to some other student).

Mini-groups of up to 5 people are more likely to provide and sustain the “magic” of co-presence. A number of studies have shown that people in small study groups are more likely to interact with other participants and unite for the achievement of common goals (Akcaoglu, Lee, 2020). Studies particularly show that one-on-one foreign language classes make it much easier for the teachers to assess the level of student’s engagement. This is due to the specifics of such classes. When the student understands that there is no one else to shift the responsibilities to, the student is left with only one choice, which is to better focus on the lesson.

The age of the students is also an important factor. Older people, or “digital immigrants,” as defined by Prensky (2020), favor traditional offline studies, because they find them more effective. The digital generation, on the other hand, prefers interactive learning strategies (Simonds, Brock, 2014). It is not surprising then, that it is the latter category of students who show interest in learning foreign languages on social network platforms, particularly on Instagram. Representatives of this generation constitute the main contingent of university students. People of the older generation, as a rule, choose to learn foreign languages in either one-on-one classes or in mini-groups.

Thus, co-presence in online classes is one of the key components of the distance learning culture and a condition for the learning success. Students should know that the teacher pays attention to them and monitors their engagement in the education process. In this regard, a quote usually attributed to Benjamin Franklin is appropriate: “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

Next section will discuss how to avoid social distancing and increase the level of co-presence and social presence in foreign language classes in the distance learning environment.

3 Methods and Techniques for Increasing the Level of Co-Presence in Online Foreign Language Classes in Distance Learning

Undoubtedly, having to increase the level of co-presence during the online classes presents a challenge to the teacher. Under the distance learning format of education, it is crucial for the teacher to understand that online learning abides by categorically different

rules and possesses its own culture of communication. At the first glance, it may seem that the contents of foreign language lessons are the same online as they are offline. However, due to the specifics of the online interaction, the contents and significance of particular lesson components change. In other words, simply transferring the same material, no matter how methodologically proven, used in the offline classes to the online sessions is not enough to organize an effective lesson.

Methodological findings and techniques that work well in traditional learning may not be appropriate for online learning at all. In this regard, when preparing for online classes, it is necessary to focus on psychology and the principles of online interaction.

The key to achieving the effect of co-presence in distance learning, is for the teachers to have their students maintain the level of attention and engagement. In order to do so, teachers should plan their lessons in advance and prepare visual aids for the class. Those visual aids should provide sufficient clarity to the students, in other words, adhere to the principle of visualization, which has acquired a whole new meaning under the modern conditions.

In the words of Lester (2006): “We are becoming a visually mediated society. For many, understanding of the world is being accomplished, not through words, but by reading images.” It becomes apparent that the requirements for visual aids used in distance learning are much higher than those used in traditional classrooms. Should a point be made clear, in an offline setting a teacher can always employ non-verbal communication such as gesticulation to better explain the idea. In an online setting, however, strained audio and video capabilities may hamper the delivery, thus, making it crucial that the key information is presented with the help of visual aids as clearly and precisely as possible. This is also connected to the fact that, according to statistics, modern people remember 10% of what they hear, 20% of what they read and 80% of what they see or do. Meanwhile, it is not enough just to demonstrate the text. The visual design of the presentation should grab students’ attention effectively cancelling out the effects of surrounding distractors.

When planning an online class, the rule of 90/20/4 (Pike, 2020) offers some help. Regular Russian university classes last an hour and a half. It is optimal to divide this time into four 20-minute blocks and stimulate students about every four minutes with elements of edutainment, change of activities, questions, or example analysis. Why so

often? The lack of eye contact with the teacher and other classmates and a large number of distracting external factors cause students to switch attention from the class to something else that is happening directly to them or around them. In order for students to be fully involved in the educational process, the teacher should contact them more often, using various tactics and techniques.

In this regard, *teachers should be trained in distance learning*. As American researchers note,

interaction and collaboration is not intuitive to many adult learners who have been educated in a predominantly lecture-based environment. Initially, a learner may be more comfortable in a passive student role and will need guidance and the opportunity to become more involved in an online learning environment (Conrad; Donaldson, 2011, p.7).

The most important task for the teacher is to build the learning process on the principles of continuous dialogue from the very beginning. Students must always be ready to interact with the teacher and their classmates. Requiring students to keep their cameras and microphones switched on for the duration of the class is not enough to achieve this goal. Teachers should show that at any time during the lesson they can engage students in an interaction not only for performing any current tasks, but also for spontaneous communication or comments in the process of explaining the material. When students understand the principles of teaching and realize that the teacher can call them at any moment, they focus more on the lesson and are less likely to be distracted.

Currently, there is a large variety of methods aimed at improving communication. One example is ice-breakers, which are effective in making the participants comfortable communicating with each other. Another example are warmers, which are aimed at repeating covered material or preparing for the introduction of a new topic.

One particular example of a warmer are exercises using news articles. Level A1 students and above can do such tasks provided the appropriate level of difficulty of the text. The following exercises involving news articles are possible:

- A teacher demonstrates the screen, scrolling through a real news feed in the foreign language being studied for 30-40 seconds (the speed of scrolling depends on the level of language proficiency). All the while the students are trying to remember as much information as possible. Then the news feed goes away, and students are asked to recall

what they saw and understood. The teacher develops the discussion on the chosen topic by asking additional questions and involving the entire class into the conversation.

- A teacher provides students with one or more authentic news headlines. Students try to guess what each of the articles might be about and tell which of the articles they would like to read and why.
- A teacher demonstrates an unusual image/photo (possibly related to current news) and urges students to discuss how and in what situation such a picture could be taken, and what is the story behind it.
- A teacher demonstrates on the screen a letter in the foreign language and asks students to help find and correct errors in it (thematically, the letter can be either a generalization of a previously studied topic or be related to the topic of the current lesson).

Practicing communication in a foreign language can and should be promulgated in self-learning classes. For example, as a homework assignment, students can prepare small video/audio recordings in pairs or mini-groups with a summary of the studied communication topic. Specifically, students can be asked to prepare 5 to 10 questions in advance, use them to conduct interviews of each other after learning the topic on Self-Presentation, and record the interviews, which can now be done on any online learning platform. Tasks of this type will allow students to develop the skills of using the studied language outside the classroom, immerse themselves in a certain communication situation, and improve their listening and speaking skills.

Providing timely feedback is important for maintaining co-presence in foreign language classes in a distance learning environment. As already mentioned in section 1 of this article, more than 44% of Russian students felt a lack of communication with teachers brought on by the distance learning. In this regard, another important task for the teacher is to organize channels of communication with students, which allow for timely and comprehensive feedback on their progress. Also, these communication channels can become an additional tool to promote the use of the studied language. Feedback can be organized in various forms: through instant messengers, various aggregators (Google Classroom, etc.), online consultations, etc. Quality feedback allows students to better process the information presented during class and form their communication skills in the studied language.

Given the examples illustrated above, teachers can achieve co-presence, which has a positive impact on the effectiveness of foreign language teaching. After all, co-presence is the difference between online teaching and *effective* online teaching.

Conclusions

The following points are important to note:

- The pandemic became a real “stress test” for the higher education system. Not all Russian universities were prepared for the rapid transition to distance learning due to different levels of technological infrastructure development, online study resource availability, and the teaching staff’s readiness to switch to digital platforms and services for education process.
- Lockdown made it possible to fully identify the pros and cons of studying in a distance learning environment. For foreign languages studies in a purely online format the lack of co-presence was especially significant, forming a social distance between a teacher and a student.
- Characteristics of student’s motivational potential can mitigate the risk of reduced effectiveness of the learning process.
- A number of existing studies, as well as the personal experience of the authors of the article, have shown that it is most difficult to create and maintain co-presence in online classes in large groups (groups of more than 5 people).
- The article outlines the main ways and means for reducing the effects of social distancing and increasing the level of co-presence.
- High-quality content alone is not a guarantee for success in teaching foreign languages online. It is important to grab students’ attention and keep them engaged in class. To do this, effective and clear visual aids adopted to the modern needs of the students should be used. Teachers themselves should be trained in how to teach online.

According to the authors, co-presence is what makes online learning of a foreign language equally effective as traditional face-to-face training. The quality and effectiveness of distance learning can be maximized by following the rules of online interactions and by adapting to the culture of online communication. Consequently,

online education can become not only a forced measure, but one of the most effective tools that can be used along with traditional education in the post-pandemic period.

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