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**BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL WAYS OF LEARNING ENGLISH
("WORDBOX" CREATION AS AN EXAMPLE)**

Abstract. Nowadays, there are many different ways of learning foreign languages, both traditional and digital. Sometimes, they can interact. This article focuses, on the one hand, on a teacher's experience concerning the implementation of manually prepared wordsearch exercises in class and, on the other hand, describes how a student specializing in programming attempted to make their creation automatic.

Keywords: language learning, online resources, lexical exercises, wordsearch box, programming language

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**МЕЖДУ ТРАДИЦИОННЫМИ И ЦИФРОВЫМИ СПОСОБАМИ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ
АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА: (НА ПРИМЕРЕ СОЗДАНИЯ «WORDBOX»)**

Аннотация. В современном мире имеются самые разные способы изучения иностранного языка, как традиционные, так и предполагающие привлечение цифровых технологий. Иногда они взаимодействуют друг с другом. Данная статья посвящена, с одной стороны, опыту преподавателя по внедрению вручную создаваемых кроссвордов в аудиторную работу, а с другой стороны – попытке студента, специализирующегося на программировании, автоматизировать их создание.

Ключевые слова: изучение языка, онлайн-ресурсы, лексические упражнения, кроссворд «wordsearch», язык программирования

There are many reasons why people learn a foreign language. Interest in another culture, the desire to broaden horizons and practical necessity are only a few of them. There are also many ways to learn a foreign language. People have the opportunity to choose from a variety of options. Some prefer traditional variants like self-learning from books and dictionaries or joining some linguistic clubs or special courses. Others, often considering the way mentioned above a bit old-fashioned, choose technology-connected ways of acquiring new skills. To say nothing of the teacher-student online interaction with the help of different platforms, which became inevitable during the pandemic period, people who wished to improve opt for various websites, applications and programs. A lot of users watch videos on Youtube in order to practice listening and pronunciation skills. The subtitles function makes the process of understanding much easier. Due to lots of books and audiobooks available now online, there are no problem to find authentic texts and practice reading. As for the users who are just on their way to advanced language and prefer to enlarge their vocabulary at first, there is a diversity of sites and applications to help. Who has not heard of LinguaLeo (lingualeo.com), or DuoLingo (duolingo.com), or Puzzle English (puzzle-english.com), and the like [1-

3]? Their main idea is simple: with the help of various exercises, you can memorize new words, as well as test your progress.

If one looks through the structure of most exercises, there will be no difficulty to determine the general principle they are based on. It is mostly play. You need to guess a word by its definition, or decipher some anagrams, or fill in missing letters, or to solve a crossword. After completing the exercise, the user feels satisfaction with the progress, but does not feel as if there was much serious effort. Thus, such learning is very much to the users' liking.

It is long since English teachers all over the world have noticed this tendency. Obviously, they decided to include such activities in their classwork (and sometimes, homework), even for little learners. From fun apps and sites they crept to real classrooms, and they are not spoken of with contempt any more. Leading authors have included additional online activities in their textbooks. Oxford and Cambridge editions now are sure to include internet-resources (Wider World 3, 2017) [4]. It became a regular topic of different workshops and seminars.

There is no doubt that materials from the internet can make your lessons brighter and more attractive to students (Online Resources for teachers; Cambridge Assessment English) [5-6]. Addicted to their gadgets as they now are, there is no secret that they find traditional ways of learning boring. More than that, they are convinced that almost all materials they work with are capable of being cheated from the Internet. They need something new, something that can grab and hold their attention at least for a while.

However, using interactive online materials can also have certain drawbacks while involving them in your regular classroom activities. Not everywhere you can have fast internet connection and necessary equipment. If you print some handouts, it can turn out to be quite costly, depending on the number of students. Some resources have certain requirements and you can sometimes depend on your educational institution for being registered, alone or together with your students (Active teach; ePanel) [7-8]. And above all – we need to keep in mind that not all students are really motivated, so they will almost certainly try to find the correct answers in the Internet. The sad truth is that they most often succeed.

So, what is teacher supposed to do? One of the conclusions the author of this article came to is that after exploring the exercises suggested online it is not difficult to create your own, using just pen and paper. After that, you just transfer them manually to the blackboard and voila! The students start guessing the right answers and go to the blackboard to write them. It is much greater fun to check how they learned new words than just asking them for translation or writing endless dictations. More than that, their attempt to cheat fails: the only person who possesses the right answers is the teacher, the internet will not help them this time. At our digital age of “copy and paste”, some-

thing done without internet help seems really amazing. Of course, making exercises manually is time-consuming at first, but as time passes, you start doing it more and more quickly.

One of the most favorite exercises for almost every group is wordsearch. A traditional wordsearch looks like this (Figure I):

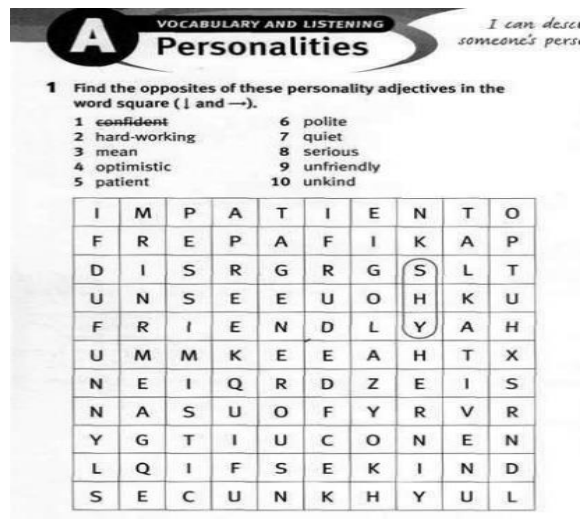


Fig. 1 Traditional wordsearch

The essence of such exercise is simple: there is a table of letters, you need to find words in it. The letters in the words are connected horizontally or vertically. A traditional wordsearch allows letters to be placed only in a line or only in a column, without intersections between words. However, nowadays you can google a lot of wordsearch exercises where the words can go diagonally as well.

The author came up with her own version, which the students called “wordbox”. Letters there can go in “snails” (you can use only right angles when you turn), diagonally. They can intersect, so that one letter can be used more than once. The wordbox is usually not big (not more than 7×7, so that you can easily draw it on the blackboard while the students are busy with some other task).

It should be mentioned that though students like this exercise in general, those specializing in Math and programming have a special attitude to it. They call it lovingly “The Matrix”. From time to time one or another student comes and asks how to create it, trying to understand the general laws how to solve it. However, some, being keen on different language-learning apps since school, are interested more in the technical creation of such exercises. Consequently, one of them, Roman Shagin, a 2nd year student at the Faculty of Math and Mechanics, went so far as to write the program for “wordbox” creation and present his achievements and conclusions at the students’ conference

“Science Kaleidoscope”, held annually at Saratov State University (Неделя науки для студентов младших курсов) [9].

“I thought it would be interesting: human brain versus machine brain, - Roman says, - Making “wordboxes” manually is a rather laborious task, so I decided to automate the process, using Python as the programming language. The script, line by line, reads the words from the file with the extension .txt and saves the finished “wordbox” in another file with the same extension.

How it actually works? At first, we determine the minimum size of the box. This is the root of the number of letters, rounded up. Then we insert the letters in it, starting from the middle of the box. Initially, the exercise was predictable, because if you know the algorithm and the words, the box becomes obvious. I improved the program by adding a random word flip.

The disadvantage of these programs is predictability, as opposed to manual exercises. However, this is compensated by the rapid generation of exercises of the same type. In this way, the task is fully completed. The teacher just needs to choose words, upload them into the program and get a ready exercise”.

Of course, such tests cannot really replace those made (or carefully chosen) by the teacher, and they have not yet been implemented in practice for teaching younger students. However, it is clear that they can help to consolidate the knowledge gained during the educational process and, which is more important, inspire further creativity. Thus, the conclusion is quite simple: in the process of learning, digital technology has all chances of being really efficient and productive – as long as it is reasonably controlled by human mind.

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