

Original Research

Technical, psychological and behavioural aspects of teaching EFL and ESP university courses online: A case study of the 2020-2021 curriculum

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Taking measures against the coronavirus pandemic in 2020-2021 many universities all over the world had to transform their formal classes into distance or online courses. The article deals with the issues of online EFL and ESP teaching and the learning process in distance format under an instructor's supervision. The research is based on the feedback data of the survey conducted for the Political Science students who were taking up the English language university course online in the 2020-2021 curriculum instead of formal classes. The aim of the research was to reveal the technical, psychological and behavioural aspects of English language distance learning in a virtual MS Teams classroom as well as to analyse the students' self-assessment of the efficiency and results of the distance EFL course. Applying quantitative and qualitative data analyses together with the method of involved observation, the authors arrive at conclusions concerning the still existing technical problems preventing students from working effectively, the disruptive character of certain psychological and behavioural patterns in a virtual classroom, as well as discrepancies between the amount of effort students put into their work and their academic achievements. Study results show both the drawbacks of the distance online format compared to the traditional formal classroom and the possibilities of effective implementation of distance forms of education at some stages of the English language educational process or within particular modules of the curriculum.

KEYWORDS: distance education, e-learning, online education, coronavirus pandemic, EFL, ESP



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus pandemic brought higher education institutions face to face with the emergency of transforming traditional formal education into its distance variant. While in the 2020 spring term the lock-

down almost paralysed the curriculum process that appeared to be spontaneous and badly organised, the following 2020-2021 academic year was not as unexpected for most of the universities many of which were for the most part ready to distance, online and blended

forms of teaching and learning. A lot of high educational establishments joined the unified teaching platforms providing the opportunity for their teachers and students to use the platform's applications effectively through the cooperative log-in systems of identification.

Although many teaching authorities and university officials show optimism about the effectiveness of transformation to the distance (online) format of education and even see the future perspective in such forms of education, many scholars and teachers are deeply critical of these hasty conclusions as there are still lots of aspects and issues of distance and online education which need to be studied thoroughly. Among those are technical issues to tackle including equipment status both of educators and students, as well as methodological aspects connected with the insufficient modern e-teaching methodology development, the shortage of online application teaching programmes for university courses via e-platforms. On top of that there are psychological and pedagogical issues of student's engagement into distance electronic education process, lagging behind are the aspects of physiological and medical concerns about the effect online education has on the health of all the participants in the process.

This research aims to study the technical, psychological and behavioural aspects of the distance online education process as well as the assessment of its effectiveness by the students of the Political Science university department who were involved in the EFL course in the 2020-2021 academic year.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term *distance learning* appeared long before the coronavirus pandemic and was applied to mark the process of education when the participants are divided from each other by space and sometimes even time zones. Distance education was seen effective in the situation when educators and students appeared to be physically separated (Rumble, 1986), the organisation of such education had a structure and function different from a traditional classroom format (Keegan, 1988), it was an autonomous form of education planned and guided under the supervision of tutors (Holmberg, 1986; 1989). The students were given more independence, demanding from them a higher level of learner control. At that stage distance education was provided without any means of modern technologies, the participants of academic learning process communicated via the postal service and used printed lecture notes and different didactic teaching materials. Initially, distance

education was mainly asynchronous without the opportunity of meeting their instructors on a weekly bases. For teaching supervision students used to come to the university for their regular term sessions twice or thrice a year which is now still being practiced in distance learning curricula at many universities.

Due to the emergency measures against the coronavirus pandemic and the quick change of forms of education from traditional formal classroom to the remote variants without an adaptation period and methodology development, the terms *distance education* or *distance learning* eventually have substituted the term *electronic learning* that is the process of getting an education using online communications technologies. Hence, *distance learning* in many academic papers has been fused with *e-learning*, and the means of delivering distance education are considered to be IT technologies (Schneider, 2020, p. 18). Therefore, in this study we will apply the term *distance learning* in its modern scholarly interpretation as a process of education in which an educator and a student are physically distant from each other and the educational academic communication is being provided with the help of modern technologies, such as computers, smartphones, tablets and other electronic devices that allow us to communicate synchronically or asynchronously via the Internet. In terms of the modern distance learning process, the curriculum courses are delivered through online classes or distance classes using a virtual classroom that is a video conferencing tool where instructors and students engage with each other and with learning material.

The results of switching on to distance learning in higher institutions are being widely discussed in academic research all over the world. Some academics and experts in education put forward an idea of the effective implementation of distance learning in higher education (Chirikov et al., 2020; Akimova et al., 2015; Romero-Ivanova et al., 2020; Wotto, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2020). Others observe both the pros and cons of the technology-aided distance learning process (Schneider, 2020; Skorobrenko, 2020; Sayer & Braun, 2020; Perrotta & Bohan, 2020; Sadeghi, 2019), while a number of researchers disapprove of the distance educational process as a whole, stating that the system of higher education is not ready for such radical change of educational format and discussing the risks to the system of education and the potential effects on the physical and psychic health of students (Kiselev, 2020; Dozhdikov, 2020; Sahu, 2020), which inevitably undermines the quality of education. There are good examples of im-

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plementing modern technologies and integrating online resources into existing EFL programmes, the special modules being developed to enhance students' autonomous activities (Dobrova & Rubtsova, 2020). The authors point out 'a need to implement digital technologies' as 'this ensures the efficiency of transferable skills fostered during the process of learning English' by new generations of students who are digitally minded (Dobrova & Rubtsova, 2020, p. 323).

More research papers focus on technical aspects of the distance learning process, paying attention to the equipment status and IT incompetence of some teachers and students (McDomhnaill et al., 2021; Peñalver & Laborda, 2021). The challenges of adaptation to the virtual classroom in urban and rural areas are discussed by Satpute (2021). There are observations of high costs of online learning and slow Internet connection at some universities (Demuyakor, 2020) while others pose a question of the importance of technical servicing support in the process of distance learning (Kiselev, 2020, p. 99). Some works are devoted to successful testing of online communicative platforms such as G suite for education (Basilaia et al., 2020).

Psychological and behavioural aspects of a virtual classroom are being observed by the scholars (Kudryavtseva, 2014; Mavrodieva, 2020) who show the necessity of rigorous investigation into this area. Taking into consideration all the advantages of distance IT educational format, the authors draw attention to such effects of distance online learning as 'absent-mindedness, lack of concentration on teaching material, quick distraction of students' (Mavrodieva, 2020, p. 250). Scholars pose an issue of the gap in investigating the impact that online learning has on the physiology and health of learners and educators (Schneider, 2020, p. 22; Dozhdikov, 2020, p. 26-27). The necessity of establishing time limits for working and studying online is also

being discussed, which draws on primary research of the interrelation between time spent in front of the computer and the development of depression (Madhav et al., 2017).

All in all, the pedagogical community agrees that the effectiveness of the remote learning process depends on the efficacy of interaction between educators and students, the competent utilisation of digital electronic technologies and adapted methodology, the efficacy of digital teaching materials, the manner of their delivery and the quality of feedback (Vayndorf-Sysoeva & Subocheva, 2020; Skorobrenko, 2020).

Even though some scholars show successful examples of adaptation of specific university courses to the distance online format (Akimova et al., 2015; Mavrodieva, 2020), they are scarce and not substantial enough to be representative of the entire system of higher education.

Nevertheless, there are lots of issues that are still missing thorough consideration in academic literature. Among them there are aspects of organisational, technical and content structure of distance education as well as the shortage of rules and norms of communicative digital behaviour having to do with digital etiquette and digital ethics. The term *digital etiquette* comprises 'the rules of behaviour culture in virtual Internet space and the norms of behaviour culture while interacting both in real life and Internet social communities' (Mamina & Yelkina, 2019, p. 29). Some universities, such as Stanford University (USA) and the Higher School of Economics (Russia) have already tried to manifest the behaviour norms of virtual conference meetings, however, 'before the coordinate values of those norms are established/developed, it is challenging to systematise and codify them' (Sychev, 2021, p. 82).

To see how the above-mentioned aspects of EFL and ESP online teaching and learning revealed themselves in the 2020-2021 curriculum, this study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What technical problems did the students face in online English classes and how did they influence the process of education?
2. What psychological and behavioural aspects occurred in the process of online English studies and how did they influence students' engagement?
3. In what way did the switch to online learning affect the students' effectiveness in the English classroom and how did it correspond with performance results?
4. What are the perspectives of online EFL learning at the university from the students' point of view?

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1. Participants

This paper aims to study the technical, behavioural and psychological aspects of the distance learning process and observe the efficacy component of virtual EFL classes delivered for the students of the Political Science department within the 2020-2021 academic period based on learners' feedback.

The survey was conducted on 74 informant respondents of first-, second- and third-year undergraduate students getting their bachelor's degree in Political Science at university, who were doing the EFL course during the 2020-2021 academic year. As a result of administrative regulations against the epidemiological situation with Covid-19, all foreign language classes at the university in 2020-2021 were given strictly online with the help of electronic communicative technologies. To follow the English language course programme, students were put into learning teams based on their placement test results. The English classes in most cases were given in 4 academic hours per week using MS Teams.

3.2. Course design

The course is designed to have interim assessments at the end of each term including portfolio and test work, with the end-of-the-course computer-designed B2 test compiled according to the European CEFR scale. The course syllabus consists of General English studies as well as the bases of ESP in the sphere of political science. MS Teams allows the lecturer to design the virtual classroom, deliver virtual class sessions, set up the tasks and deadlines, get the works submitted by the students, provide feedback, and monitor students' performance. The student-educator interaction is available synchronously in a virtual classroom, and asynchronously in general and private chatrooms and through the feedback comments in the task section.

3.3. Methods

The method of the research is conducting a survey which makes inferences from data collected by means of the questionnaire specially designed for research purposes using Google Forms. The questionnaire is aimed to get the students' response on the technical, behavioural and psychological aspects of distance learning, self-assessment of their productivity and results. The first set of questions directly deals with technical issues of distance learning communication during the lessons: 1. Have you got a specially equipped work-

place for distance learning? 2. Which technical devices do you mostly use for the online English class? 3. How often within the academic year did you experience technical problems? 4. Which technical problems occurred during the virtual classroom sessions? 5. Were there any cases when you couldn't join the class because of technical problems?

The second set of questions was designed to reveal psychological and behavioural patterns that might have occurred in the process of distance learning: 1. Did you experience stress or discomfort during the online lessons? 2. Mark the scenarios in the distance class that are true for you (it is more difficult to work in an online class compared to a formal classroom; it is easier to perform in an online class compared to a formal classroom; I feel embarrassed talking to the microphone; I feel embarrassed in front of the camera; I don't switch on my camera because it influences the quality of broadcasting; I don't switch on my camera because my appearance doesn't match the social educational environment; I don't switch on my camera because there are other people present or the background is not appropriate; I have difficulties in concentrating in an online class).

Finally, to observe the efficacy component of the distance EFL process, the third set of questions was developed: 1. How often do you get distracted during the distance EL class? 2. Mark all possible options to indicate what might distract you during the online class (extraneous noise; completing assignments for other disciplines; social networks and mobile connection; presence of members of the family, friends and other people; other). 3. Mark all possible options to indicate the activities you enjoy performing online (compiling writing assignments; vocabulary and grammar practice; communicative practice (speaking, making presentations; comprehensive reading and discussion; listening comprehension practice). 4. Assess the effectiveness of your online performance compared to the traditional classroom work (decreased; stayed the same; increased; not sure). 5. Assess the formal results of your online performance based on test grades, writing assignments, and other assessed papers compared to the results achieved in a traditional classroom format (increased; stayed the same; decreased; not sure). 6. Which format would you prefer to continue your EL studies in the university (distant/online, blended, traditional/formal)?

The last question was designed to ascertain students' preferences about the format of the EL university course they would like to take in the near future.

After collecting data from the survey, the next step was to process the questionnaire responses employing a mixed-method approach with statistical computational analysis, quantitative and qualitative analyses of students' responses, as well as the inclusive method of involved observation of the whole educational process.

4. STUDY RESULTS

4.1. Technical aspect of distance/online education

The main objective to meet was to explore the challenge of a technical nature the participants of online educational process might have experienced. We were interested in the technical status of learners, the equipment they use for their online studies, the quality of Internet connection, and other possible technical factors that might prevent them from an effective learning process.

Most respondents reported having a specially equipped working place (96%), while only a few reported the lack of it (4%). According to the question-

naire results most students appeared to be rather well-equipped and use computers/laptops (65%), or both computer and a mobile phone (28%) and only a few students use primarily smartphones for online classes (5,5%), and very few use the combination of several gadgets like computer, tablet and a smartphone (1%).

Although many students are quite well equipped for their distance classes, there are still many of those reported to have faced technical problems, though the frequency of such difficulties wasn't significantly crucial. Most of the respondents replied they only *sometimes* experienced technical difficulties (43%), another group of 38% marked the option *rarely*, 12% of the informants chose the option *not often*, while only 6% mentioned that they *frequently* faced technical problems (Figure 1). Most of the students were preparing for their studies in the circumstances of pandemic restrictions, therefore they appeared to be technically better prepared for the distance learning process in the 2020-2021 academic year.

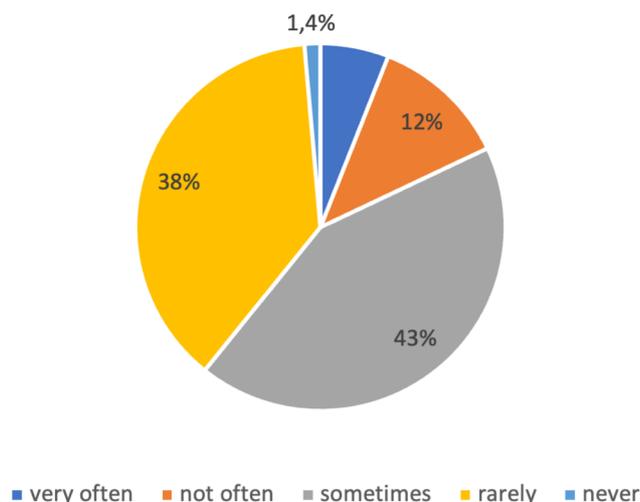


Figure 1. How often within the academic year did you experience technical problems?

Technical obstacles most often mentioned by students referred to poor quality of broadcasting (56%), non-operating camera (22,5%) or non-operating microphone (38%). A considerable number of students complained about not hearing their lecturer (32%) or the other students (27%). Several learners mentioned unstable Internet connection and failure in operating MS Teams (Figure 2). All difficulties observed undoubtedly influenced the quality of distance English classes and undermined students' performance online. However, having paid attention to the frequency of those technical obstacles mentioned above, it could be concluded

that most technical disadvantages occurred not very frequently (as the bulk of respondents (93%) together reported *sometimes*, *rarely*, *not often*) and couldn't affect the quality of distant class seriously though sometimes influenced its efficacy.

Surprisingly, the question of concern is that while few students experienced technical difficulties (about 6%), a substantial number of respondents (46%) mentioned that there were situations when they couldn't join the class because of a technical problem. Almost half of the students might have used technical reasons as an excuse for skipping an online class.

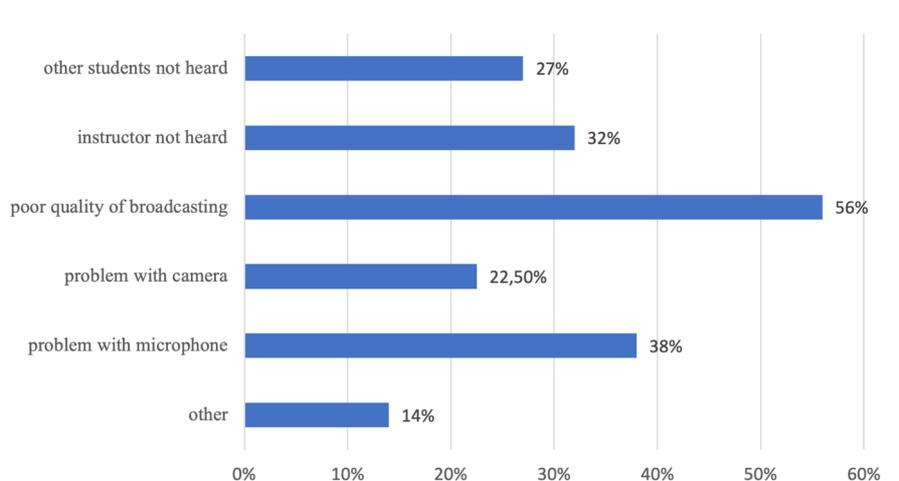


Figure 2. Which technical problems occurred during the virtual classroom sessions?

4.2. Psychological and behavioural aspects

To analyse psychological and behavioural aspects of a distance classroom we aimed to register the following: occurrence of stress during the online lesson, and the reasons to switch off cameras and microphones while being present in a virtual class. Switched off cameras is the most disturbing pattern of students' behaviour that lecturers complain about in distance learning. According to educators, students very rarely turn on their cameras even in the process of spoken communication with the teachers or other students, which may be considered a break in digital etiquette and disruption of university regulations for online class procedures. Cases of switched off microphones are considerably less frequent and only occur occasionally.

The survey on the stress factor showed that, for the most part, learners feel quite comfortable in the virtual classroom and are not under stress (73%). However, about 22% of them admitted the occasional presence of the stress factor while only 5% of students commented frequent occurrence of stress.

Figure 3 shows that almost half of the respondents noticed that they feel more comfortable being engaged in an online English class (46%), while those who find it easier working in a traditional formal classroom amounted to 26%. Meanwhile 8% of informants get embarrassed talking to the microphone and almost one third (28%) of students feel too shy to turn on their cameras during the lesson. Therefore, the data shows the presence of a certain psychological barrier in a rather significant number of online learners.

The survey results have allowed us to reveal the three reasons, other than embarrassment, that prevent students from making their cameras operate (Figure 3):

their appearance that is inappropriate for the learning environment (32,5%), the broadcasting failure because of camera issues (38%), and the most popular answer was an inappropriate background or other people's presence (50%).

Meanwhile, a rather large percentage of learners admitted having difficulties with concentration during a distance class (39,2%) (Figure 3). Some of them are constantly distracted (19%), about half of the students get distracted from time to time (46%) and only one third of the respondents (28%) rarely abstract themselves from the learning process (Figure 4). Figure 5 shows the exterior reasons that cause learners' distraction and decrease their concentration on the teaching material. Those patterns of behaviour relate to the presence of members of the family or other people in their room (54%), networking or mobile connection (60%), extraneous noise (39%) and completing assignments for other curriculum disciplines (22%).

Evidently, the factor of declining concentration and increasing distraction appears to be a serious problem that considerably influences the effectiveness of students' work in a virtual class. The absence of the instructor's control of what is going on behind the screen immediately affects students' engagement. Even though most of the students have a well-equipped workplace, many of them ignore the necessity of being isolated from any exterior distractions and arrange their workspace appropriately for the learning environment, avoid getting distracted, switch off mobile and networking connections that are not needed during the lessons. On the contrary, the possibility to keep their cameras turned off allows them 'to relax'/'hide' from the lecturer always having an excuse of technical problems.

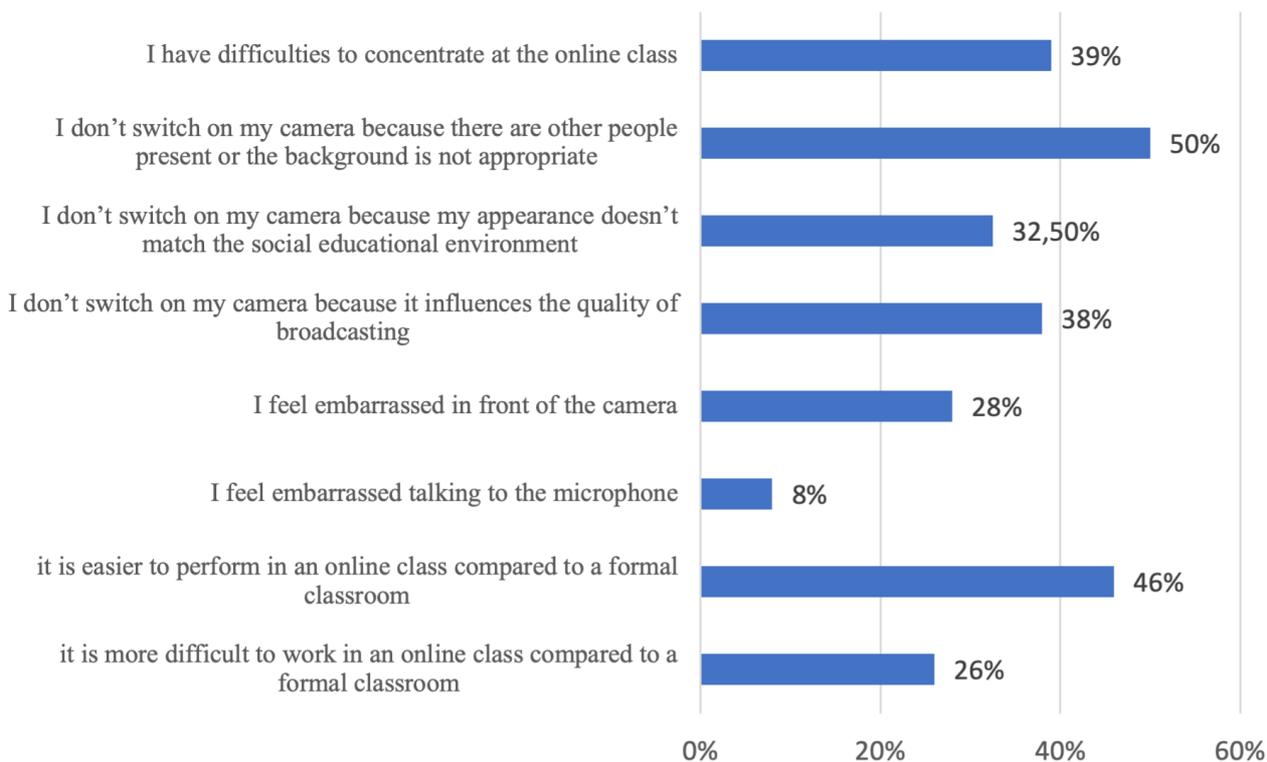


Figure 3. Mark the scenarios at a distance class that are true for you (all possible options)

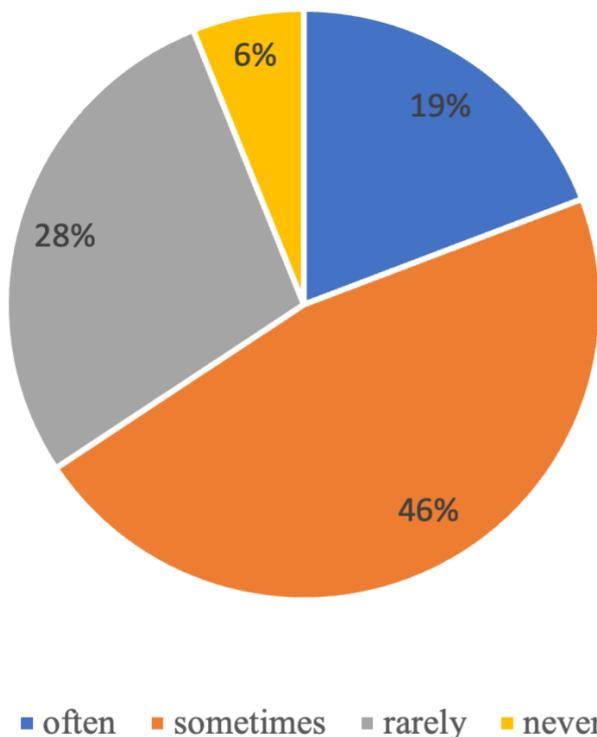


Figure 4. How often do you get distracted at a distance EL class?

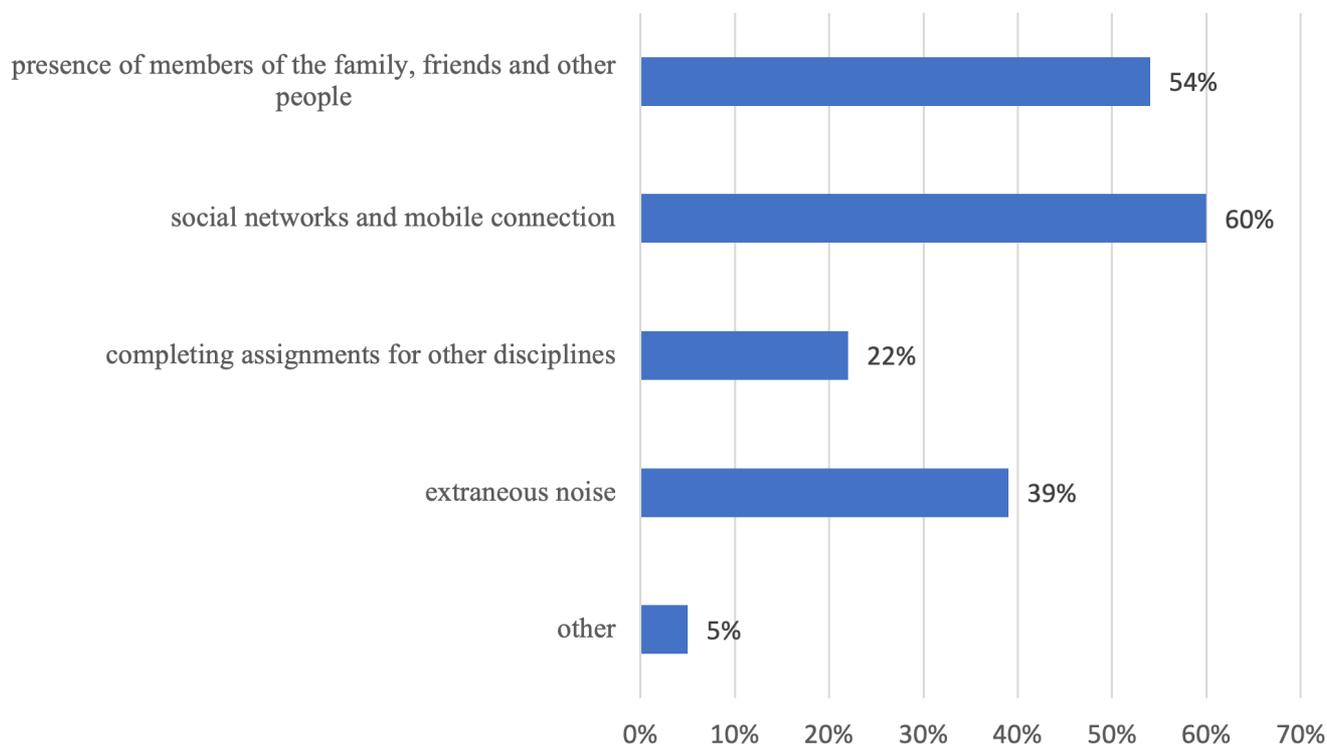


Figure 5. What might distract you during an online class? (Mark all possible options)

4.3. The efficacy of students’ performance and assessment results (students’ evaluation)

The questionnaire results show that most of students find it not difficult to deal with different types of tasks aimed to develop the essential language competences in online learning. The leading position in popularity is taken by oral communicative activities and presentations (58%). A substantial number of students enjoy completing writing assignments online (42%) as well as doing reading comprehension tasks (46%). The online vocabulary and grammar activities are popular with 34% of students, while about 33% of respondents are quite happy with online audition activities.

Surprisingly interesting are the results of effectiveness assessment by the students themselves (Figure 6) in comparison with the results of their performance (Figure 7) during the year in a distance format. Assessing the effectiveness of their work in the English language online class (Figure 6) about 42% of participants didn’t notice any changes in comparison with their productivity in traditional format, 26% of them think that their productiveness decreased in the process of distant learning, while 22% of students believed the quality of their work improved.

However, there is a noticeable discrepancy between the assessment of the effectiveness of students’ work and the evaluated results (Figure 7) based on performance grades they got during the academic year. Consistently, about 45% of informants reported the same level of performance results within the distant learning process, which mainly corresponds to the number of those who consider their effectiveness staying the same as in a traditional language classroom (42%) in Figure 6.

Nevertheless, the results were better with an excessive number of people (42%) in Figure 7 compared to those who improved their productivity (21,6%) in Figure 6. It might be due to availability of reference materials while doing test work and writing assignments, that are not allowed during the test in traditional formal classrooms. It is also possible to ask other students for help as it is not easy for the instructor to control students working autonomously online.

The same reason might be given to justify the fact that while only 7% of learners in Figure 7 reported that their results became worse, the decline in effectiveness was noticed by almost one fourth of the students (26%) in Figure 6.

Such disproportion in effectiveness and performance results might be related to the lack of methodology development to provide assessment and control online, as well as the teachers' inability to monitor the stu-

dents working on their assignments online both during the lesson and in the interim assessment, which is connected with the imperfection of telecommunication systems at their present state of development and design.

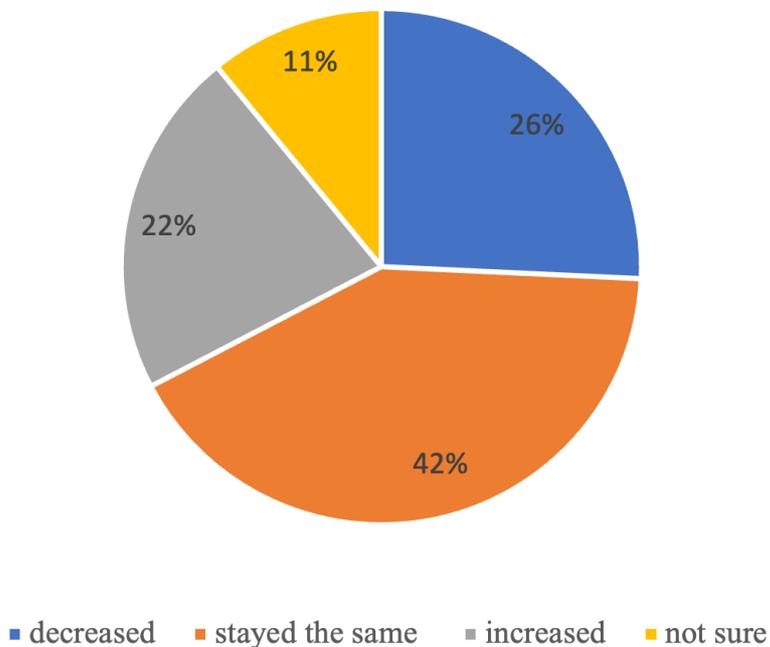


Figure 6. Assess the effectiveness of your online performance compared to the traditional classroom work

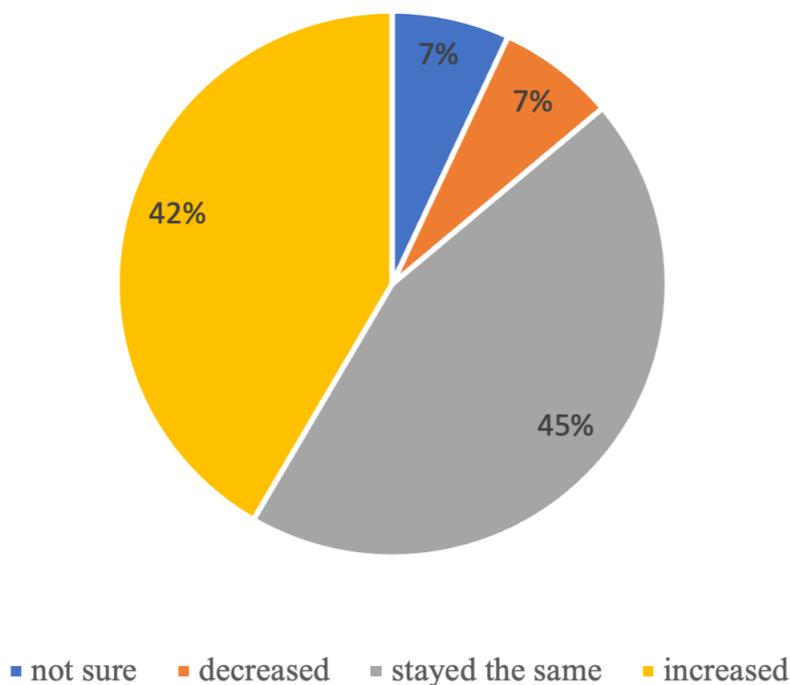


Figure 7. Assess the formal results of your online performance (based on test grades, writing assignments, and other assessed papers) compared to the results got in traditional classroom format

4.4. The perspectives of distant and traditional format of EFL learning as seen by students

At the end of the survey the students were asked to choose in which format they would prefer to be enrolled into their future English class. They were also given the opportunity to give their comments on the format they have chosen. The opinions were divided into three groups.

About half of the informants (45%) indicated their willingness to continue English studies in a distance format, the rest of the respondents showed either their readiness to return to the traditional format of learning (29%) or to use a blended learning format having partly classes online and partly in the classroom at the university department (27%). It is important to take into consideration the factor of effort and time economy as the choice of a distance or blended format was mainly caused by the lack of the necessity of spending more than two hours commuting to the department, which most of the students of political science have to face. The second factor that influenced the choice in favour of a distance format is connected with the preferences of students to devote more time to their major disciplines rather than do their best in the English class. Some of them are not properly motivated and do not see the reasons to attend the English class offline.

Nevertheless, those students who are more encouraged to obtain a good level of English language knowledge and skills in their comments share an opinion that in spite of all the advantages of distance learning (*no time spent on travelling to the department, comfortable environment at home, getting enough sleep, meals at hand, not forgetting one's learning materials, could be combined easily with work or other activities*) the traditional format of studying in the classroom under a good instruction is more effective (*discipline and strictness, less distracting factors, setting one's mind on studies, no temptation to engage into activities other than studying*). The supporters of the traditional format also report that in the process of online learning the efficacy of communication in English goes down as it becomes more difficult to interact verbally with the lecturer and other students. They comment that more students complete their tasks carelessly, unscrupulously and dishonestly.

Those in favour of the blended format see its advantages in certain learning scenarios, for example, they find it comfortable to study language theory and grammar or to be engaged in listening comprehension activities virtually with the help of online IT technologies. At

the same time gaining practical skills in oral and written communication appears to be more productive in the classroom under the supervision of a teaching instructor.

5. DISCUSSION

The scope of this study was limited in terms of collecting data from the informants of only one university department and needs to be extended in further research. Nevertheless, the study offers some valuable insights into what is going on in an average English language distance class at many universities and fits in with the previous studies (Schneider, 2020; Peñalver & Laborda, 2021; Skorobrenko, 2020; Dobrova & Rubtsova, 2020), where the researchers highlighted functional, technical and efficacy problems as some of the most challenging and marked online learning environment as not completely comfortable due to the lack of real communication. The critical observation of data obtained in this study proves that existing obstacles mentioned by other scholars have a significant impact on the quality of students' performance.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the study suggests that it is definitely premature to speak about absolute advantages of the distance format of EFL university classes over the traditional format of interaction in the classroom which has been suggested in previous research by Dozhdikov (2020) who sounds very sceptical about the possibility of successful substitution of traditional educational format by the online learning promoted by some educators and officials in the field of higher education. It should be doubted that massive online substitution of most university courses will bring its benefits without losing the quality of education.

The effectiveness and quality of distance education still cast doubt and cannot be considered equal to the quality of the learning process in traditional studies on campus. As might be observed very clearly from the present study, the decline in students' engagement and concentration outlined in previous studies by Kudryavtseva (2014) and Mavrodieva (2020) is apparent and the technical difficulties described in this survey correlate partly to those mentioned in the other works by McDomhnaill et al. (2021), Peñalver and Laborda (2021), Satpute (2021), and Kiselev (2020).

The psychological and behavioural patterns of students' behaviour revealed in this research show the urgent necessity of developing teaching online technologies to enhance the role of instructor presence observed in prior research on MS Teams by Park and Kim (2020).

‘Taken together, the findings do not disapprove of taking advantages of modern IT technologies to deliver certain parts or modules of the English language syllabus within the university curriculum to facilitate the autonomous work of learners’

It also showed the emergency of designing virtual classrooms in accordance with the rules of digital etiquette and educational university policy, which has been proposed by Sychev (2021) as the need for codifying the norms of videoconferencing.

The advantages and disadvantages of employing distance forms of learning mentioned by students in their comments are in line with prior studies done by Sadeghi (2019) who observed the advantages such as ‘studying from anywhere, saving time and money, no commuting, flexibility, earning while studying’ and disadvantages of studying online such as ‘high chances of distraction, no social interaction, difficulty staying in contact with instructors’ (Sadeghi, 2019, p. 83-84). Hence, it looks more reasonable to introduce short distance courses or some parts of the educational modules aimed to develop specific competences in certain areas of knowledge and integrate them into the curriculum. This research shows that students take it positively in case they are given the opportunity to complete some tasks autonomously with the help of technologies while at the same time enjoying the opportunity of face-to-face communication with teachers and groupmates in the process of seminars and workshops.

6. CONCLUSION

This research project was undertaken to investigate the technical, psychological and behavioural aspects of distance educational processes at EFL classes of the Political Science students at Saint Petersburg University within the 2020-2021 academic year. The second aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of students’ work in a virtual classroom in comparison with the results of their performance during the online academic year. Based on the analyses of data retrieved from the survey the following conclusions can be drawn from the present study to answer research questions.

1. Even though most students are prepared and well equipped to be engaged in the online distance process of learning a foreign language, they still face technical difficulties that cannot be avoided with the

help of faculty or university administration. The obstacles are sometimes caused by the quality and speed of the Internet connection and programmes for telecommunication that are used in the process of distance education. At present the IT technologies in the telecommunication sphere are not yet desirably effective to allow stable Internet connection without failures and delays of live performance/broadcasting as the participants of the process appear to be in different regions of the country and use different types of personal equipment and Internet services. Even without facing particular problems of a technical nature some unscrupulous students might use them as an excuse to skip an online class, not to be engaged in the learning process or not to appear on air with their camera switched on, which leads to inappropriate behaviour showing lack of digital etiquette and disregard of university regulations.

2. From a psychological and behavioural perspective, the evidence from this study suggests that average effectiveness of students’ work in a virtual classroom decreases due to plenty of distracting factors related to being at home or dormitory, sometimes outside or on the way. This undesirable pattern of behaviour can be explained by students’ unwillingness to arrange their workplace according to the learning environment, to respect the rules of digital etiquette and follow the university regulations for online classes.

3. The students’ performance results and interim online assessment grades obtained through distant tests without an authorised system of proctoring and monitoring can’t be considered qualitative and reflective of their real level of language knowledge and skills. Even employing the system of proctoring at the final end-of-the-year attestation procedure does not solve the problem of providing ongoing monitoring of learners’ performance in a distant class within the academic year.

4. However, the results show quite a positive attitude of students towards using a computer-mediated format for certain types of language activities which definitely speaks in favour of the successful implementation of computer technologies in the language learning process at a university, correlating with some of the findings offered by other scholars, e.g., Chirikov et al. (2020), Akimova et al. (2015), Romero-Ivanova et al. (2020), Wotto (2020), Krishnan et al. (2020).

Taken together, the findings do not disapprove of taking advantages of modern IT technologies to deliver certain parts or modules of the English language syllabus within the university curriculum to facilitate the autonomous work of learners.

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