ONLINE LANGUAGE TEACHING EFFICIENCY IN COVID-19 ENVIRONMENT

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Summary. The article represents the results of the survey conducted among the group of university and high school teachers to establish the specific tendencies in online language teaching and learning within the COVID 19-affected environment. The study hypothesis presupposed verification of the thesis that language learning needs adjustment to new circumstances. During 2020-2021, the major platform adopted by Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University has been MS Office. It provided the participants of learning process with necessary tools such as calendar planning, lecture and seminar moderation, data submission and storage as well as assessment options and statistics. Incorporating the platform required tutorials for teachers since there were certain issues with registration and running the MS Office programme on various gadgets. At the initial stages alternatives were allowed to be used for online classes. The survey was conducted and analysed by means of quantitative and descriptive methods and on the basis of continuous academic discussions. It was concluded that the teachers treated the challenges of new learning environment differently. Namely, the respondents were invited to rate the general effectiveness of constant online language or language related subject learning, characterise institutional support, specify the prioritised digital platform and share feedback regarding their satisfaction with the educational process within late 2020 - first half of 2021. The majority of the respondents denoted the satisfactory effectiveness of online English language system. The educational institution was reported to provide sufficient support on distant learning platforms. Roughly one third of the answers pointed at the use of several distant learning platforms. Zoom has been defined as the main teachers’ preference probably due to simplicity of installation and running flexibility on various gadgets for both sides. The most burning issues of online learning during the COVID-19 period were associated with internet connection and access.

Keywords: COVID-19 language teaching, MS Office, e-learning platforms, digital skills, language department
Foreign language teaching at university level has distinctive peculiarities requiring a range of didactic approaches and adjustments. Depending on the specialisation, linguistic faculties prioritise different areas of professional competence embracing translation expertise, literary text analysis and work with audio-visual materials, etc. Nowadays, at Volyn National University, the Faculty of Foreign Philology the syllabi and their teaching components are chosen on the premises of division into English philology (translation) and Education. The major difference is in vocational aims, the fulfilment of which should presuppose the involvement of case-approaches, sufficient hands-on training, and of future professionals as well as a sensible student oriented attitude. The choice of specialisation can be regarded as a fundamental change implemented within the last decade in our educational institution.

The aim of this article is to outline the key didactic aspects treated in this context dealing with optimising the process of studies at the initial level of university training in terms of translation specialisation. The tasks were predetermined by the necessity to revisit the basic teaching modes in pandemic times and to preserve the status quo of university lecturer thriving to communicate effectively with the students to maintain their e-learning motivation and inspire further curiosity. The material of research comprises the workings on various interactive platforms (MS Office, Google Classroom) and messengers (Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram) which has become rather a must than an alternative medium of dissemination of daily tasks, a means of attendance control, verification and sharing the obtained results.

Overall, the process of language teaching has promptly shifted its focus towards the students' independent engagement, more flexible schedule planning, and submitting completed works through Microsoft Office, Viber and Telegram, etc. The reformatting of the learning environment has saved the educational flow from non-continuity but ostensibly brought about bitter challenges. The most important was the problem of connection, artificial truancy and gaps in systematic attendance. Correspondingly, the unbiased assessment of students' achievements has become complicated. Even technically savvy students experienced hardships in getting used to the distance learning routine which influenced their immediate response time and cooperation within the subgroup. For a language teacher it took some time to reformat the classes, to tailor and make them for the learners as efficient as possible. It was necessary to find a compromise between the didactic volumes and the combination of the most appropriate teaching methods and incorporate various online tool-kit solutions.

Theoretical background for this study. For this study, the sources were analysed addressing the issue of pandemic educational challenges and the solutions implemented in different countries and in Ukraine. In particular, the distant learning problem was investigated in VNU based on MS Office statistics and comparative survey results. In its turn, the discussed teaching problem received attention in the works of Finnish scholars (Sanusi et al., 2021) who demonstrated the utilisation of different academic social network platforms using qualitative and narrative methodology. The positive associations between teaching experiences and facilitated transition to remote classroom were predetermined by familiarity of participants with technologies. The said article mentions the majority of e-learning platforms and feedbacks from 64 ResearchGate scholars. The challenges were
internet issues such as cost, the rate of student participation, missing clarifications, insufficient students' preparation and face to face class disposition. Overall, except for the first issue, since Ukrainian internet providers are loyal to customers in pricing policy, all other problems were detected in remote local learning. Analysing the teaching experience globally has shown that, for instance, Nur Fitria's (2020) study involved investigation of opinions on online English learning system by descriptive qualitative method of performance analysis of 81 English college and university lecturers in Indonesia. The majority of the respondents reported to have used Google Classroom (40.3%) while Schoology, Edmodo, Moodle and Google Meet enjoyed less than 10%. Among miscellaneous responses there were self-platforms, SPADA system, Elena Platform, English Discoveries, Email, Skype and BlogSpot. The open-ended survey addressed the issue of institutional support of e-learning, the options of using platforms for English purposes and the kinds of learning systems. It was concluded from Nur Fitria (2020) that distant COVID-19 language learning has positive and negative traits and may not be as effective as with other subjects. In fact, more teachers preferred using a single platform to combinations of platforms.

**Research methodology.** For our study a descriptive qualitative method of analysis of 34 teachers’ responses was used to verify the hypothesis that transition to online during the COVID-19 pandemics has dramatically reshaped the system of traditional classroom language learning. Based on prior discussions with colleagues and their ongoing progress, we have devised a small Google Form survey including the following questions: 1) Please, rate the effectiveness of the use of online English learning system for university students (from 1-5); 2) Does your educational institution provide sufficient support on distant learning platforms and external applications? 3) What distant learning platforms have you used most in your teaching practice? 4) From your perspective, specify the learning issues which were the most burning during 2020-2021: Internet (connection, programme installations, access, etc.), blended learning disadvantages, difficult communication, students' language performance and class participation, other; 5) How would you rate your performance as a language/language related subject teacher during the COVID-19? (from 1-5). The results were converted into pie charts with color schemes.

The Google Form was disseminated among the department and faculty colleagues via direct messaging and through Facebook posts. Interestingly, the respondents were rather reluctant to answer immediately and needed some encouragement. The majority of the 34 participants are affiliated to home university, which is Lesya Ukrainka VNU. 2 high school teachers with prior university experience were also invited for the survey on friendship terms. The figures help to establish the general tendency and enable to outline the state of affairs in online language teaching and qualify its efficiency for Ukrainian students from didactic perspective.

In this connection, it is worth mentioning that our university has been proactive in implementing distant learning platforms for the last three years through cooperation with Pearson. The textbooks from Intermediate to Advanced levels are supplied with My English Lab solution which is incorporated into the syllabus for current and final assessment of students' grammatical, lexical, logical reasoning and speaking skills. Undoubtedly, this platform maintains constant language competence development and provides them with basic algorithms for online testing and monitoring the records. However, some students needed time to adjust to the
platform, especially those living in rural areas and who started learning English as the second foreign language in the second semester. Notwithstanding some trifle issues, the Pearson platform is really user-friendly and includes switching between the levels, tracking the progress and options such as reassignment for a student who was missing from classes for known reasons. Moreover the educational company itself provides its customers with teaching support, homeschooling ideas and psychological tutorship (Pearson).

For the sake of accumulation of statistical and descriptive data, The 2020 Global Learner Survey conducted via Harris Poll lists essential aspects of e-learning catalised by COVID-19 postulates that education has changed forever and universities can be the so-called “recovery engines” for the economy (Pearson Global Learners Survey). Moreover, the online learning experience is anticipated to stay and it evokes the related issues of modified access to overseas higher education from geographical and economical perspectives. Changing educational attitudes and trust is badly needed these days. It was interesting to find justifications that saving higher education took enormous effort globally and the study process kept afloat due to digitalisation skills. All in all, the new normal prompted students to think beyond obtaining the university degree. Correspondingly, the students of Lesya Ukrainka VNU were reported to be engaged to a greater extent in part-time employment which was one of the main reasons for their regular missing attendance.

Results. Our 2-day survey has been carried out to collect the answers to the focal questions and not to be time-consuming for language teachers. Several language departments were included as responding targets (Conversational Practice, English Philology, German, French, Applied Linguistics and English for Humanities Specialties). There were also respondents who asked for more detail but refused from answering or ignored the appeal for uncertain reasons, so they were not included. There were two questions with grading options (fig.1 and fig. 2) and three closed-end questions (fig. 3-5). Sectors on fig. 1 represent the results which testify to the fact that the effectiveness of online university English can be qualified as “good” at the end of current academic year. During the poll, the marks fluctuated but were more inclined to grade 4. Overall, the teachers assess their performance as “good” or “excellent”.

1. Please, rate the effectiveness of the use of online English learning system for university students.  

34 відповідей  

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | [5%] | 2 | [23%] | 18 | [47%] |

5. How would you rate your performance as a language teacher during the COVID-19?  

34 відповідей  

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | [0%] | 1 | [23%] | 3 | [47%] |

Fig. 1  

Fig. 2
The next three figures represent the response percentages to more specific questions concerning the support with technical issues during platforms utilisation (fig. 3), exemplifying the preferred platform type (fig. 4) and concretising problems faced during the e-learning process (fig. 5).

Fig. 3 proves the fact that VNU has treated carefully the issue of MS Office platform by providing enough support (58.8%) and fostering smooth adjustment to new technologies. Nearly one third of the respondents, however, were not sure about this issue. The reason for this answer is associated with different characteristics of personal devices used for downloading the relevant program components. Some teachers acknowledged that the platform was not as user-friendly as Zoom or its analogues. The fig. 4 vividly shows that Zoom was very popular among the teachers (50%), whereas smaller half used a combination of platforms to provide the quality of language learning (44.1%). However, MS Office has much more exciting options and the users can take advantage of external applications such as Quizlet, Kahoot and others including Zoom.

The last pie chart (fig. 5) explicated the overview of critical concerns of e-learning. Namely, it was highly probable and the survey revealed that internet issues were the most acute, which constitutes almost the half of the responses (44.1%). The second major problem was students’ language performance and class participation. Blended learning disadvantages were not specified although they occupy almost a quarter of all responses. This type of learning has added extra paper-work and caused misunderstandings connected with the class schedule due to pandemic closures and shifting from online to offline learning and vice versa. The minority of the respondents chose difficult communication and also specified depression due to lack of offline communication/isolation as the major culprit in this unstable process.
Conclusion

The survey discussed in the article was an opportunity to find out the effectiveness of online language learning for university students during the COVID-19 affected academic year. The results can be used to prove the thesis that educators have done their best to overcome hardships and to provide their students with relevant e-learning tools and to mitigate the consequences of blended studies. The quantitative method of analysis was employed to establish mixed platform choice tendencies. The major concern from teachers’ viewpoint is about the internet which is underlying for students’ learning performance and class participation issues. Some university respondents refused to answer the survey questions probably for the fear of disclosure of the results to a third party or lack of extra instructions for the survey. The students’ responses require a separate further research.

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