

Emergency Distance Language Learning in the Conditions of the COVID-19 Pandemic and War in Ukraine

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and a full-scale Russian invasion have significantly changed the Ukrainian higher education system. As a result, distance learning became the only acceptable form of education, complying with the current world norms of academic space. The research aims to examine the inherent challenges and opportunities for English as a Foreign Language (hereinafter – EFL) learners in the distance mode. The survey results demonstrate that distance language learning has many advantages. It enables instructors to structure their teaching practices to best suit students' learning styles, enhance their interaction, and foster a student-oriented approach.

Keywords: emergency distance language learning, EFL learners, learning styles, interaction, student-oriented approach.

Introduction

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion, which came as an abrupt shock to millions of Ukrainians, education systems were obliged to suspend online classes and realign instruction to various remote areas and hybrid environments creating a distinctive context for teaching and learning. Despite considerable challenges facing many educators worldwide, they still “scrambled to shift their practice from in-person to remote teaching within a matter of days” (Trust & Whalen, 2020, p. 189). Adapting to new appalling “living” conditions, each higher education institution has implemented both generally accepted and exclusive practices of EFL distance teaching and learning. However, the educational process still poses a rigorous test for both instructors and students.

Emergency education is the education with disrupted access to learning facilities and materials due to natural disasters or man-made crises. Under these circumstances, the right to education primarily serves as an indispensable security and protection tool. Due to the COVID19 pandemics and war in Ukraine, distance learning is becoming the prevalent form of education, “partially putting classroom education on the back burner” (Kamal et al., 2021, p. 7307). The issue has grown in importance in the light of recent research in foreign language teaching and learning (Dhawan, 2020; Dam, 2021; Alcalde Penalver & Garcia Laborda, 2021). In their seminal article, Yuzyk et al. (2022) outline the legal and regulatory framework for the introduction of distance learning in higher education institutions in Ukraine and its practical aspects in the conditions of quarantine and military conflicts. Rahim (2020) discusses the challenges and strategies for facilitating viable online assessment in emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, much uncertainty still exists about the specificity of distance learning implementation in the EFL classroom with its diverse forms, methods, and means.

The research aims to examine the inherent distance learning challenges and opportunities for EFL learners in emergencies. Furthermore, since the distance education model will grow in its dissemination in the forthcoming years, it is necessary to present the foreign language learners' experiences to act on suggestions for further improvements to the current model.

Literature review

The impending crises served as a powerful stimulus to use the emergent technology in the education environment, which provided “new ways to communicate and new forms of social organization, that enable new spaces to learning using information technology” (Carvalho, 2015, p. 133-134). Momentous decisions must be made to avoid educational and professional training disruptions. Subsequently, distance learning was pioneered as an autonomous pedagogical technique, didactically coordinated and collaborative. The former must fulfill education goals with the extensive use of information technology. Although emergency distance learning, also known as emergency remote learning, involves engaging the available distance learning tools formerly exploited for delivering online or blended instruction, the experts in the field find dramatic differences between online and emergency distance learning. The latter is seen as “a stopgap or temporal measure aimed at mitigating the interruptions that emergencies might bring into the educational delivery process” (Sedofia & Ampadu, 2021, p. 24).

On the contrary, Evans & Pauling (2021, p. 122) are convinced that the future of distance education is “intimately connected to broader social, economic and cultural changes”. Since education is the universal good, the powerful force of evolutionary progress, and the basis of equality and peaceful existence within human civilization, its goal is “a person, not a service with all that it implies” (El Guessab et al., 2021, p. 496). Thus, different emergency distance learning strategies have been adopted by different higher educational institutions in Ukraine. The increased use of both online teaching modes and other media have been introduced to help minimize the effect of the pandemic and military conflicts on students’ academic achievements. However, such “just-in-time” distance learning posed real challenges to Ukrainian academic communities. The instructors were demanded to manage both group-based and individual learning environments, identify some common contexts, foster students’ learning autonomy, and assure social presence on a 24/7 basis.

Language learning is a complex cognitive and social process that is “directional, intentional and conscious” (Funk et al., 2017, p. 27). Therefore, it is reasonably assumed that distance learning in the EFL classroom allows language learners to develop their cognitive abilities with technological advancements and practice a foreign language more authentically. Respectively, the classroom can be configured as “a space for inquiry in which what is central are the learning processes that are possible to unfold” (Landau, 2019, p. 54). Furthermore, communication held in an offline format is anchored in a specific time and place, requiring students’ complete alignment with the academic curriculum. Conversely, distance learning introduces more flexibility in the EFL classroom, offering boundless opportunities for language learning without a fixed curriculum.

The digital tools that have been implemented in emergencies are capable of engaging language learners in an interactive learning experience. However, they are yet to replace the face-to-face environment. Information technologies disclose novel multifunctional approaches to EFL teaching and learning compared to conventional ones. Distance language learning is implemented in synchronous and asynchronous modes, each having a considerable difference. Syno et al. (2022, p. 461) claim that “synchronous learning promotes learner communication by fostering cooperative activities and often expanding the lesson above the curriculum”.

In contrast to synchronous mode, asynchronous learning creates an academic space to learn through students’ personal language experiences. According to White (2003), in asynchronous mode, learners can participate in in-class activities and respond at their convenience, receiving time for thought and reflection between responses and revisiting discussions later. However, to bring together the benefits of both delivery modes, most instructors focus on integrating them while teaching a foreign language. Due to this

multisynchronous learning approach, the students can feel utterly and effectively engaged in learning activities within online class settings and establish bilateral communication with the instructor.

In any mode, the learner's autonomy plays a crucial role. This view is supported by Chik (2018), who states that the learner should be capable of two abilities: "first, the ability to take charge of one's own learning through digital practices and in digital worlds, and second, the ability to take charge of one's own learning in terms of language learning needs" (Chik, 2018, p. 74). In other words, the student must possess competence in digital literacy and timemanagement skills, the capacity to select relevant academic resources, and awareness of his/her language learning needs regarding the level of proficiency and learning styles.

This inquiry has been undertaken to determine how the distance mode of language learning in emergencies affected academic efficiency within the Ukrainian EFL university curriculum. Firstly, it aims to analyze the resulting changes in the educational process of the teacher training study program "English Language and Literature. World Literature" offered by the Department of English Philology of the Faculty of Foreign Philology of Uzhhorod National University (Ukraine). Secondly, the survey helps explore the students' learning styles and preferences based on their personal experiences. Thirdly, it examines the prospects for implementing distance language learning in the academic landscape.

Research methodology and participants

A special questionnaire was developed comprising ten questions. The questionnaire was administered to the Bachelor students of the Faculty of Foreign Philology of Uzhhorod National University in electronic format. The sample of this study includes 45 respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey. All the participants were females. They are Ukrainians by nationality. Data analysis was performed, and results were presented in terms of percentages. The qualitative analysis seems quite effective since it allows getting accurate figures and deeper insights into the issues in question.

Research results and discussion

This study explored how students respond to being exposed to the unexpected transition to distance EFL learning in conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine. An attempt to address the research problem necessitated finding out about: 1) information and communications technology (hereinafter – ICT) infrastructure and modes used in EFL distance learning; 2) the advantages of delivering foreign language classes in emergency distance mode, and 3) its disadvantages. To achieve this goal, the questionnaire was designed for students to voice their experiences after a sudden transition to a different EFL learning modality.

The first question in the questionnaire concerned the mode the instructors use to deliver online EFL classes. 53% of the respondents indicated that teachers conduct their classes in synchronous mode. However, 47% reflected that they encountered a blend of both synchronous and asynchronous modes while learning a foreign language. None of the students pointed out purely asynchronous mode to be constantly implemented in the EFL learning setting. Thus, the students are primarily placed in the conditions of real-time communication, being assigned a definite function.

The survey results for the second question are shown in Fig. 1. A total satisfaction rate of distance EFL learning in emergencies was 53,3%. Two groups of respondents (40%) were

partially and generally satisfied yet had minor complaints. These results from the observation will yield further improvements in didactic practices and learning experience.

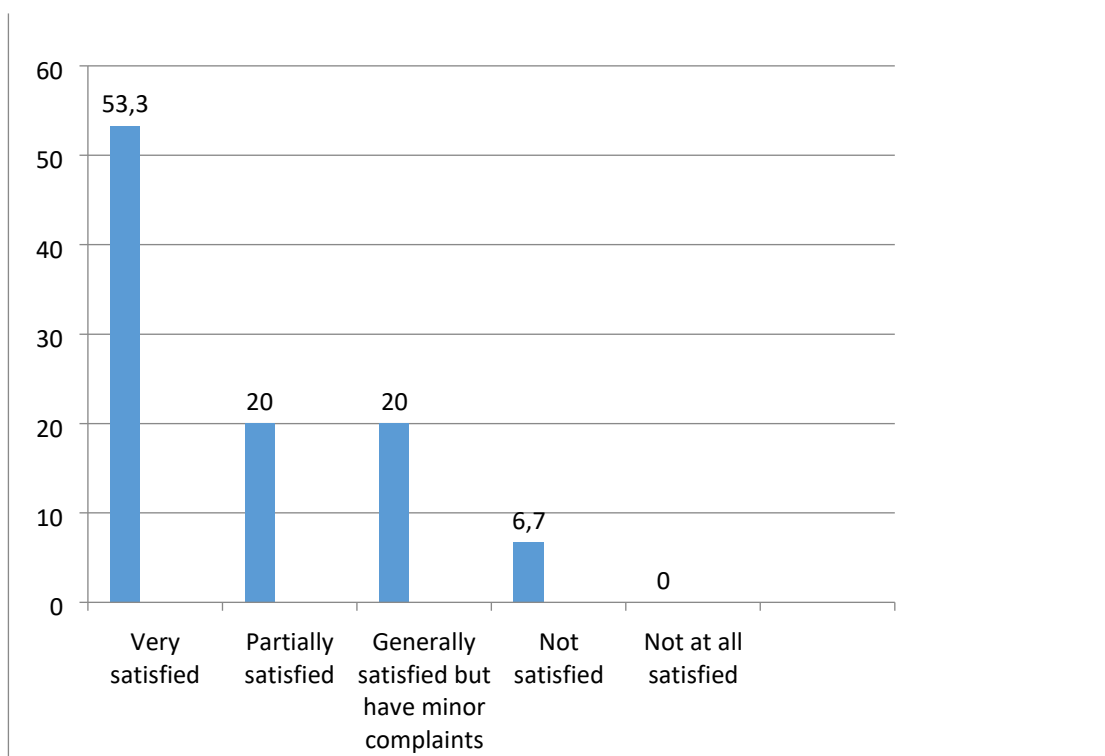


Figure 1 Satisfaction rates of distance EFL learning in emergencies

The overwhelming prevalence of distance education has brought about a rise in digital tools available for quality and authentic teaching and learning in a virtual environment. However, the right choice of modern updated technology often shadows well-known, established practices of face-to-face EFL courses. The survey results revealed that despite the rapid transition to online learning, none of the students were left without the required technology tools. 51,8% used personal computers and laptops to access online classes, 44,4% worked on their smartphones, whereas 7,4% exploited tablets.

Question 4 in the questionnaire focused on the benefits the distance learning model has brought into the EFL classroom. The students were asked to tick all the options they agreed with. According to the results, the most significant advantages of distance EFL learning are varied learning styles, interactive and student-oriented approaches, fine-tuning the learning pace, and the possibility of being provided with differentiated instruction. Regarding the answers above, we can assume that flexibility played a vital role in the EFL learning process.

Though distance foreign language learning has a plethora of advantages, it is not devoid of disadvantages. Responding to Question 5, the students were asked to tick the option(s) they considered to be an obstacle to distance learning implementation in the EFL classroom. The two most significant issues raised by the distance learning experience are the absence and instability of the Internet connection (73,3%) and an increased time spent on learning (33,3%). In addition, 20% of the respondents echoed that they experienced extra cognitive load and were exposed to extraneous work that was conceptually aligned with the required task. 13,3% highlighted that the teachers managed to simulate “living” EFL classroom situations online for students to overcome pressing problems. The equal number of students (6,7%) pointed to the lack of computer literacy skills in achieving the desired learning outcomes and decreased interaction and succinct communication with instructors.

There are diverse communication platforms that turned out to be effective in EFL learning and summative assessment (Fig. 2). All the students encountered that video conferencing helped them progress through their language learning the most. In order not to leave any “gaps” in students’ learning activity and accumulate linguistic knowledge without disruption, MyEnglishLab (93,3%) and Google Classroom (87,6%) served as indispensable virtual tools. However, messengers (6,7%) were not opted to fulfill vital functions in EFL learning pedagogy.

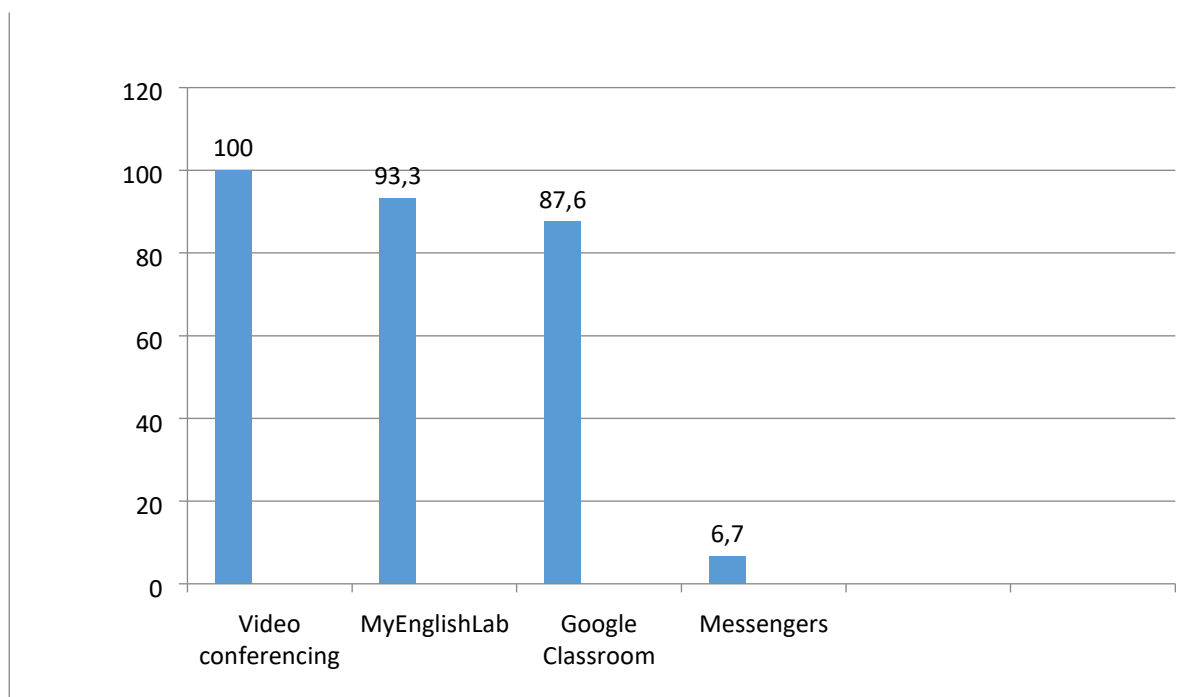


Figure 2 Communication platforms used by the teachers during EFL distance learning

The issue of assessment in remote mode is quite acute. Admittedly, many students (46,7%) reflected that assessment strategies adopted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine had not changed. 40% of the respondents witnessed instances of alternation in conducting assessments, whereas 13,3% did not wish to voice their views on the issue and remained undecided.

Although distance education has grown substantially in volume over the past three years and most notably since the COVID-19 quarantine, its role in shaping accessible EFL learning has been a subject of an ongoing debate. The current situation in Ukraine has promoted its importance in the emergency teaching and learning space. Nevertheless, most of the respondents (60%) see distance learning elements as an auxiliary learning method. The rest would like it to be implemented as the primary method of language skills acquisition. The results support the assumption that distance learning is not equally efficient, and the students are not equitably proactively engaged in the learning process.

Question 9 concerned the future engagement of distance learning in curricular and cocurricular settings. 53,3% of the respondents would like the elements of distance learning to be implemented partially in the educational process in the future, 40% would agree to use it, whereas 6,7 % are unsure about its use in the future. In this respect, the instructors aim to expand on the hastily implemented models during the emergency transition to remote instruction.

As to the aspects hindering a full-scale impactful implementation of distance learning in the EFL classroom, the students pinpointed an unstable Internet connection (46,7%), rapid fatigue due to prolonged work in front of a computer (20%), loads of assignments (18,3%) and lack of necessary equipment (15%). To prepare the students for the growing demands of digitalization, the instructors should leverage to facilitate greater student mobility and flexibility.

The results of this research and the responses of the EFL students involved in it support the idea that the necessary and optimal conditions must be created for impactful and authentic distance language learning in higher education establishments. When questioned, most students admitted that they consider the distance learning model quite feasible due to its many benefits in the EFL learning setting. However, its practices do not seem to have been perfectly coordinated so far due to the absence of a single common strategy or model for executing this learning mode.

Conclusion

The paper examined the students' experience of the unforeseen transition to distance language learning as the only option to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine. The survey questions guiding this research address to report the benefits and hindrances of delivering impactful online language courses during lockdown and military conflicts. The results illustrated how distance language learning exposed a lack of information technology infrastructure and students' engagement while offering flexibility and increased teacherlearner-content interaction.

The qualitative data showed a trend of increasing satisfaction with online courses. Despite the overall favourable attitude towards distance language learning displayed by most EFL students, 60% of the respondents consider it an auxiliary learning method in the future, giving their preferences to a more conventional educational environment. Nevertheless, 86,7% are convinced of the necessity to acquire skills in using distance learning technologies in their future professional activities. The survey results demonstrate that distance learning has many advantages for EFL learning, enabling better structuring of teaching practices to adjust to students' learning styles and increasing their social presence. Many of the student respondents in our study revealed the advantage of flexibility given by digital and distance learning, be it in a synchronous or asynchronous mode. However, an unstable Internet connection (46,7%) and rapid fatigue due to prolonged work in front of a computer (20%) are the aspects that negatively affect the organization of full-scale distance learning.

Based on the results of the current study, it would be interesting to explore in-depth the impact of emergency distance teaching on achieving learning outcomes related to theoretical and practical aspects of foreign language acquisition.

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