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Distance Learning of a Foreign Language: a Comparative Analysis of Modern Platforms and Online Services

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Abstract: The article provides an insight into the issues of using modern information and communication technology in distance learning of a foreign language. In many ways, technology has profoundly reshaped English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. Modern online platforms and services have become indispensable tools in higher educational establishments, paving the way for developing new effective EFL practices. In the context of foreign languages, distance learning can be synchronous and asynchronous.
A thorough analysis of available online platforms and services has proven that such a technologically integrated approach is suitable for materials development in foreign language teaching. Along with demonstrating a high level of interactivity, they are also easy to use and contribute substantially to building strong reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. Depending on the type of instruction, online resources perform different functions. For example, synchronous learning promotes learner communication by fostering cooperative activities and often expanding the lesson above the curriculum. By contrast, asynchronous learning provides the space to expand the learners' individual experiences of language.

Keywords: *information and communication technology; EFL teaching and learning; COVID-19 pandemic; higher educational establishments; synchronous and asynchronous learning; reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills.*

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Introduction

Recent developments in information and communication technology have led to the appearance of novel and revolutionary methodologies and practices in the EFL teaching context drastically different from inefficient, traditional methodologies used before. Technologies allow rapid communication, creation of networks and generate new ways of collaboration and learning challenges (Carvalho, 2015, p. 139), being the most distinctive characteristics of modern culture. The last year has seen new importance in a vast array of online tools for EFL teaching and learning due to the spread of COVID-19, which came as an abrupt shock to millions of people (Panasenko et al., 2020, p. 123). Despite the growing presence of distance learning opportunities in the EFL class, there is still considerable ambiguity regarding technology-mediated language learning practices.

In terms of EFL education, distance learning offers opportunities for affordable learning anywhere and anytime. Hence, it provides delivering education from a teacher to students who are not physically present in traditional classroom settings and substitutes conventional face-to-face instruction. Moreover, distance learning can turn an essential tool to learn a foreign language aligned with the current demands of education globally since there is a growing need for English language teachers to explore language teaching from a transformative, socially and globally aware perspective (Al Ryiami, & Al Issa, 2018, p. 38-39). The latter is believed to be the engine of economic and social progress, an integral factor in forming and developing a strong and successful society (El Guessab et al., 2021, p. 503).

In addition, distant learning opens new opportunities for higher educational establishments, which commenced implementing the so-called systems of distance learning based on online platforms and services. Following the path of democratization of the world, distance learning gives each participant in such a process the right to success (El Guessab, et al., 2021, p. 501). In other words, the results benefit both teachers and students. In the context of COVID-19, distance learning is viewed as one of the essential remote learning solutions for a Ukrainian higher educational sector. In this regard, flexible online learning platforms and services prove demanding and challenging teaching and learning modules in 21st century education. As a result, the research focusing on distance learning online resources in the EFL classroom proves to be highly topical.

The present study *aims* to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of available online platforms and services regarding integrating the distance

learning approach into the EFL classroom in the higher education context. Therefore, this study contributes to research on distance learning practices in EFL teaching and learning by demonstrating the guiding principles of various distance learning platforms and services (Moodle, Google Classroom, MyEnglishLab, Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, and others). Furthermore, the study offers some important insights into how educators incorporated synchronous and asynchronous EFL learning into their curriculum. Finally, it offers a broader framework for developing and implementing a promising distance EFL learning environment in higher educational settings.

EFL distance learning in the context of COVID-19 pandemic

Due to the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a rapid rise in technology tools in academic settings. The former has led to creating the so-called 'virtual universities' capable of revolutionizing the culture and environment of apprenticeship shared by students and teachers (Carvalho, 2015, p. 133). The introduction of such educational mode and modules is justified by considerably improved knowledge storing and sharing, free and financial accessibility, student mobility and flexibility, and adaptability to various educational environments.

Recently many scholars (Marshall, 2018; Amhag et al., 2019; Ashilova et al., 2019; Bates, 2019; Phoong et al., 2019; Ruano-Borbalan, 2019; Stefaniak & Carey, 2019; Ha & Im, 2020; Guardia et al., 2021; Khatser et al., 2021; Prymakova, 2021; Stezhko et al., 2021; Palamarchuk, 2020; Sheremet, 2019; Gerasymova, 2019; Onishchuk, 2020) have examined the purpose and value in the implementation of digitalization in higher education. One major issue that has dominated the field for many years concerns educator's adapting teaching styles and competence. One study by Englund et al. (2017) explored clear differences between novice and experienced teachers.

In many ways, the implementation of distance learning practices in Ukrainian higher educational institutions has considerably changed traditional views on the concept and content of education and its learning outcome. This fact shows a need to be explicit about precisely what is meant by the term 'distance learning'. In current research on education, distance learning is also referred to as distance education, e-learning, online-supplemented, dlearning, hybrid learning, and flipped classroom. Regardless of various terms used to describe this phenomenon of a complex nature, it causes much controversy in the educational field. Distance learning is generally understood to mean a technology-mediated interaction process between a teacher and students, fostering a favourable teaching and learning

environment. As noted by Landau (2019, p. 54), this type of representation implies a new step in the historical development of the classroom and enables a semiotic landscape about the shapes that can assume the learning events.

Although distance learning appeared in research on education around 2000, the practice is undeniably not new. Highly professional instructors tend to have blended various approaches, teaching methods, procedures, and strategies to maximize knowledge acquisition and productive skills development. Thus, the most effective teaching practices always involve more than one method or approach complemented by synthesizing diverse learning strategies. In addition, an effective curriculum is sustained by merging various modes of content delivery such as practical classes, project-based tasks, essays, reports, and others.

At the time of its introduction into the educational space and before COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning was perceived as a purposeful supplement to traditional in-class instruction with self-study e-learning activities and practice. Recently, the concept has come to encompass a much wider range of learning approaches and environments. As noted by Faramarzi (2015, p. 199), psychical presence of students in the classroom is not a priority now, given that they use online technologies in different contexts daily. Then again, geographical isolation no longer poses serious limitations on the teaching and learning process. Moreover, self-regulation and time management and past online learning experience have been shown to be related to satisfaction with and usefulness of online learning (Landrum, 2020, p. 128). Consequently, it is commonly believed that distance learning adds value to the teaching process and promotes better learning outcomes.

The reasons for employing distance learning in the EFL learning environment overlap those mentioned so far. However, it is not surprising that technology-mediated language learning seems to be most fruitful when the technology is congruently integrated into the overall cross-curricular activity. Furthermore, concerning language learning and teaching in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, the social factor is becoming increasingly important. Carvalho, (2015, p. 140) sees studying in cyberspace as lonely and isolating and highlights the importance of student's realistic expectations about e-learning. In this respect, tech-savvy teachers play an important role in maintaining and embracing their students' attention in creating language learning opportunities and soft skills development.

Materials and resources development appears to be an essential issue in EFL distance learning. The former is mainly associated with coursebooks, printed matter, videos, CDs, YouTube, dictionaries and thesauruses,

grammar reference books, and photocopied materials that can facilitate a foreign language's active learning. Motteram (2011, p. 309) holds the view that when designing materials using technology, it is useful to have a framework from which to judge the potential value of an activity before devoting time and effort to its implementation.

Frequently, distance learning is commonly regarded as an alternative to traditional learning systems. In the groundbreaking study "Language Learning in Distance Education", White (2003) demonstrates how traditional forms of distance language learning are supplemented by opportunities for interaction and collaboration online (Figure 1).

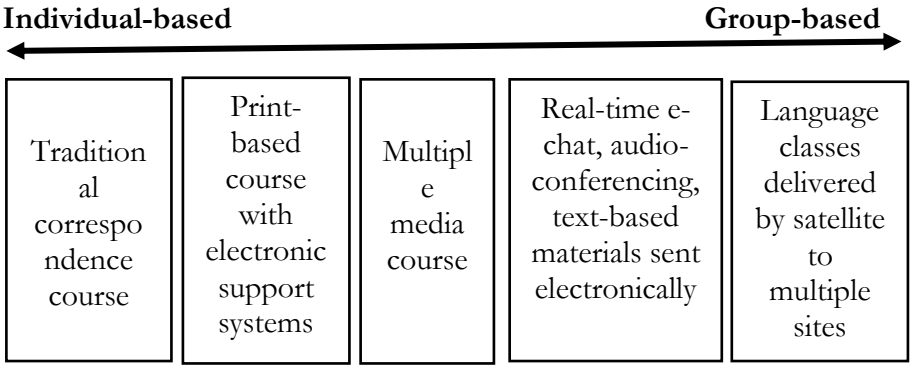


Figure 1. *Distance language learning contexts*

As follows from the figure shown above, there is a radical difference between individual- and group-based learning systems since they vary in several critical language learning dimensions. However, White (2003) suggests that developments in technology have made it possible to combine individual and collaborative learning opportunities. Taken together, this refined image of the language learning process outlines essential distance learning opportunities offered within a range of cultural, educational, and institutional settings.

Language learning in distance education can be categorized into synchronous and asynchronous, each having its advantages. The synchronous mode of EFL teaching and learning is the most common format. Students and a teacher are simultaneously connected in such language learning via a shared network. This process can be realized through synchronous conferencing via video or audio. Consequently, distance learning of foreign languages takes places in an interactive environment (Faramarzi et al., 2015, p. 195). Moreover, the participants can feel

absolutely and dynamically engaged in the teaching and learning process inside an online class.

Students' participation in asynchronous online discussions represents a complex endeavor (Koehler, 2020, p. 64). Asynchronous instruction, on the one hand, does not impose any time or geographical restrictions. The students are offered to download the uploaded materials conveniently and use them as much as needed. In addition, this mode of learning offers flexibility in schedule, the possibility to review the problematic areas and provides opportunities for learners to gain constructive feedback about their performance. However, asynchronous mode excludes bilateral communication between an academic instructor and students in contrast to synchronous mode.

Integrating both modes in the EFL teaching and learning process can distort a generally accepted image of teaching as the overt teacher-learner presentation of information. The advantage of modern platforms and online services lies in providing instant access to data (Ferreira, & Bernales, 2020, p. 187). They contribute much to creating a successful EFL distance learning model for higher education.

Technology platforms and services in distance learning of a foreign language

In the 21st century, modern education is becoming increasingly complex due to the spread of COVID-19. "The pervasive integration of digital technology" (Viberg et al., 2018, p. 98) into higher education also has a considerable impact on the students' learning practices and teachers' teaching experiences since they introduce drastic changes in the traditional concept of effective education. In a study that describes the results of the technology revolution in higher education, Sutton & DeSantis (2017, p. 225) argue that the history of information technology is filled with innovations that have been underutilized or abandoned. Consistent with this view, Means & Neisler (2021, p. 15) claim that not all internet access is sufficient for digital learning activities, drawing a vivid example with video conferencing, which requires high bandwidth and often does not satisfy assumed educational needs.

The choice of online educational resources plays a vital role in the EFL teaching and learning process. Martynenko & Shevelko (2021) has recently outlined the educational online platforms selection criteria for prospective interpreting training. They suggest the following conditions for online platforms acceptance: user-friendly access and navigation, possibilities

of creating teaching content, bilateral communication, computer-aided assessment, and compliance with academic integrity rules. However, in our view, the choice of online resources whether operating synchronously or asynchronously depends on the language areas to focus on and skills to be developed.

There are two main types of online learning resources: online platforms and services. Regardless of their common aim to provide the digital space for effective learning, they differ dramatically in synchronicity (synchronous and asynchronous mode) and individuality (individual and collaborative base). Online services stand for online Internet resources providing various information and services as well as asynchronous discussions. Along with providing global access to Internet facilities, they promote the extensive use of PowerPoint presentations, audio files, graphics, animation, or sound, or streaming videos to motivate the learner and appeal to different learning styles. However, it is true that with the help of computer graphics and design, almost any element of information can be transformed into a visual image and an artificial association in order to connect images, thus facilitating the process of capturing (Samorodova et al., 2021, p. 132).

Generally, an online platform presents program software promoting pedagogical practices and information technologies in distance learning through a student(s)-teacher collaboration. Hrydzhuk et al. (2021, p. 203) point out that a platform should integrate digital learning tools, facilitate the planning and design of educational activities. Exploring the benefits of the system in the context of educational content creation and educational practice tooling, Wu and Plakhtii (2021) tested the Blackboard Learn cloud platform. Together, these studies provide important insights into the creation of an effective and favourable learning environment.

The paper will examine how distance learning of a foreign language is implemented in Ukrainian higher educational establishments. In the official letter of 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine recommended integrating LMS means, e-mails and messengers (Viber, Telegram), video conferencing platforms (MS Teams, ZOOM, Google Meet, Skype, and others), forums, and chats into the distance learning process. Many educational institutions incorporated the recommended online services and platforms into the EFL classroom to bridge the resource gap and eradicate the lack of authentic materials. However, due to practical constraints, the study cannot comprehensively review all existing online services and platforms. Therefore, it will focus on those most widely used in academic settings, fostering the expansion of the computer-mediated

learning environment, and allowing for synchronous distributed interactions that resemble live face-to-face classroom interaction a lot.

One of the most popular distance learning platforms is a free and open-source system *Moodle* (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), which emerged out of Australia. It offers excellent opportunities for students to engage in the EFL learning outside the university environment. The platform allows the creation of efficient student-oriented distance learning courses, which can be easily complemented and adapted to specific academic learning tasks. Hence, the instructor is responsible for the planning of the course, its administration, and management. In view of its capacity, the next advantage of this free, open-source software platform is its accessibility. Hence, the learners can participate in the educational process anytime and anywhere, submitting their works online and being selective in the assigned tasks. Likewise, teachers can check their students' assignments at a convenient time, tracking their timeframes and deadlines.

The platform's structure operates on a modular basis, ensuring overall control over its functions, the delivery of information, and its dissemination. As a result, it can be partly or fully modified in the 'blocks' pull-down menu. In addition, Moodle allows for blending traditional in-class pedagogical approaches with various computer-mediated out-of-class practices, ensuring learner's autonomy. With this resource teachers have been offered hundreds of 'tips and tricks', mostly without the contextualizing knowledge needed to judge which teaching tactic is likely to work where (Rapanta et al., 2020), and just supporting students to learn and interact. Following this, Moodle makes it possible to upload the course syllabus, post individual and group-based assignments (forums, quizzes, surveys, tests, chats, blogs, workshops), create question banks, facilitate online discussions, write essays and reports, assess the tasks, maintain a gradebook and student scales, give feedback.

In EFL learning, the proposed platform helps students develop good reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. The instructor can upload and share the authentic texts for reading comprehension. While coping with this task, they can also develop their active vocabulary by compiling an embedded glossary. Students' writing skills may be 'polished' by instant messaging used to experiment with conversation skills, forums for handling discussions on students' interest topics, or essay writing to engage students in research on class projects. Finally, well-developed speaking skills are an indispensable attribute of any student majoring in English. The only opportunity to practice communicative skills is to record the audio version

of the speech in the form of a monologue and upload it on the platform. Taken together, Moodle proves to be a valuable online tool for reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills development. It is responsive to different learning styles and provides a fresh approach to EFL learning, adjusting to learner's personal needs. The uploaded language learning content helps generate and categorize linguistic information by providing a diversity of alternative tasks: true/false, multiple-choice, fill-ins, matching, short answer, select missing words, embedded answers, an essay.

The next platform under review is *Google Classroom*, released in 2014 as a part of Google Apps for Education. It can enforce bilateral communication between the students and the educator in the written form as it is devoid of a video conferencing option. By utilizing this platform, the teacher can assure students' constant exposure to authentic input, eliciting active responses. They can peruse dramatic renditions of stories, fill in various forms and questionnaires, render the texts into the target language, and write reports and essays. Furthermore, it is possible to foster students' error correction skills due to general access by asking them to post peer feedback in comments.

Seeing a need to specify the knowledge and EFL skills, Pearson Education launched and promoted another digital EFL learning tool in distance education. *MyEnglishLab* is designed as an adaptive interactive, flexible resource accessible from any browser or mobile device. Along with materials available in the publisher's books, it offers a range of activities integrated with the course syllabus, valuable reference material, phonetic practice, diagnostic tools, and even student gradebook. To improve one's pronunciation, the student's self-recording and then listening to students' pronunciation are widely implemented. MyEnglishLab can also be used as homework courseware or extra practice integrated into a traditional EFL classroom. Among its undeniable benefits, one should mention its adaptation to students' needs, providing General English courses and those for Business Purposes.

The additional option of diagnostic analysis makes it possible to see how long each student has spent on tests, practice activities, and assignments. It is designed to monitor and get feedback on how often the instructor gets the students involved in online activities during tutorials and tracks their progress. Furthermore, the tutor can initiate personalized learning, instantly identifying the areas (grammar, vocabulary, speaking, reading, listening, or writing) they need to work on. For each student to advance faster, the educator may assign extra practice. Common error

reports keep track of the typical students' errors and foster focusing on the problematic areas which require further practice.

Recently, there has been an increased focus on implementing critical thinking skills in various areas of teaching and learning (Chirciu, p. 2020, 123). It does not seem surprising that the EFL classroom is not an exception. Critical thinking is essential in EFL learning since it promotes students' autonomy and self-confidence. MyEnglishLab offers a lot of practical assignments designed to boost students' reading and writing skills. While coping with reading comprehension activities, the learners can test their critical skills by analyzing, thoroughly scrutinizing a passage, and relating their own experience to the main character's. Working on writing an assignment, the students reflect on crucial social and worldwide issues, encouraging creativity and innovation. Listening comprehension presupposes the phases of evocation, meaning realization, and reflection initiated at different stages of audio text analysis.

Any language learning curriculum is designated to develop good communication skills. Students' ability to communicate well is often affected by various factors, namely classroom settings, motivation, and familiar/unfamiliar teacher-learner context. To overcome language barriers and students' fears to communicate, one must not only have a good command of a language but possess ability to think and act critically. Discussions and debates are the most popular EFL distance learning strategies enhancing students' motivation and achieve incredibly positive results.

Modern online platforms such as ZOOM, Skype, or Google Meet raise the possibility of interactive contact and participation in the EFL learning process. They facilitate the development of critical thinking and soft skills, which are important to success in education. These online resources operate in the synchronous mode, allowing for teacher-learner(s) online face-to-face communication. They combine video conferencing and online meetings supplemented by a group chat. To expand the students' knowledge better, the teachers can deliver the information in both lectures and tutorials. Compared to such tools as Viber or WhatsApp, ZOOM, Skype, or Google Meet platforms offer extensive functional opportunities during online EFL teaching. The role of these online platforms in teaching phonetics is also significant since they help improve students' pronunciation. Along with online pronunciation errors correction by the instructor, in ZOOM, Google Meet, and Skype, the course participants can record the whole call and save it on the cloud for further watching.

Lectures present a basis of subject knowledge which any other form of instruction cannot substitute. In the online format, backed by ZOOM, Skype, or Google Meet platforms, lectures can be complemented by a PowerPoint presentation or streaming video. Moreover, a lecture in the online environment can change the image of a traditional lecture keeping the learners constantly engaged in in-class activities. Thus, the students can pose a question or facilitate a discussion by raising their hands. In addition, the lecturer's pitch of voice, the pace of speech, mimicry, gestures, and eye-to-eye contact contribute much to learners' comprehension of the academic material. However, despite the various advantages of these platforms, teachers may face challenges with assessment and learners' evaluation appropriately.

Being kept in quarantine due to COVID-19 pandemic, students may feel isolated and thus yearn to practice their communication and collaborative skills. ZOOM, Skype, or Google Meet appear to be well-established tools to serve these purposes. They can support creating an EFL learning community, fostering active cooperation while working on a joint project, brainstorming new ideas, or finding a common solution to the discussed problem. In this cooperative environment, each conference participant can step out of his/her comfort zone, learn to reach a consensus, and negotiate. Furthermore, a pair or group discussion in an EFL classroom is a common practice, which can be implemented online in the Breakout Rooms format by ZOOM and Google Meet platforms. Classroom management takes the secondary role since the classroom focus shifts to the interaction between participants.

What is now needed is a comparative analysis of available online services employed in EFL distance learning, which can significantly extend the possibilities of learning a language in individual settings. Along with formal online classroom instruction, the latter are believed to add extra information on the subject matter discussed in class, making it more interactive and more accessible to be perceived visually.

British Council: Learn English Online can give access to external learning media. The former is a unique online community for EFL learning and teaching based on the principle of authenticity. To put it another way, authentic input that is relatively rich and varied on this website stimulates students to interact with it and actively respond. The language content the students are exposed to varies in purpose, medium, and even style. The materials are available for learners of both General and Business English. Furthermore, those students who aim to pass IELTS (International English

Language Testing System) test can find a range of flexible and personalized online courses to suit their unique learning styles.

An abundance of high-quality resources (articles, videos, audios, and courses) is provided to help teachers and students continue professional development. One can find activities to practise listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills based on their language level. Good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar regulations serves as a reliable basis for activating the learner's communicative skills. The creators of British Council: Learn English Online do not overlook these aspects. The website offers interactive exercises and extra practice for those who opt to enlarge their vocabulary or increase their grammar competence.

The other possible computer software implemented in the EFL learning process to develop students' academic writing skills is *Grammarly: Free Online Writing Assistant*. The latter is an online proofreading website providing the correction of spelling, punctuation, and grammar mistakes. Furthermore, to ensure academic integrity, it employs the system of plagiarism detection. Since the texts that can be uploaded are style-specific, the service offers synonyms appropriate for specific contexts. Sometimes the meaning of the sentences written by students is not precise but somewhat ambiguous. Hence, Grammarly proves to be an essential tool to correct EFL mistakes in writing since it provides the learner with the block of words to choose to fit the context perfectly and make the written piece more eloquent and expressive. However, Grammarly is an artificial intelligence tool. Therefore, students sometimes may get confused with unclear comments.

For this reason, much cognitive load is demanded on their part to revise their works and bring them to the required condition. The educator's role in the teaching and learning process of EFL writing with Grammarly is significant since he/she should serve as a mediator and ensure that the students are skillful enough to operate the software. Finally, this service deprives the teacher of the opportunity to evaluate the students' works regarding their content and structure.

TeachingEnglish with the British Council is the professional development online resource for EFL teachers. The latter can learn about the best EFL teaching practices, helpful content, practical tips promoting 21st century skills, using inclusive practices and multilingual approaches. The range of media and modes varies from articles written by experts worldwide to webinars, live-streamed talks, and annual international IATEFL conference recordings given by renowned speakers. Besides the resources mentioned above, the website offers teachers several different three- or four-week training courses. In addition, such ventures in academic settings

foster communication with other instructors from all over the world, sharing experience in EFL teaching.

The online services analyzed above create a substantial basis for productive and fruitful EFL learning and teaching in distance format in tandem with user-friendly online platforms. They allow the learners to acknowledge both their strengths and weaknesses in learning a foreign language. Undeniably, the choice of online media to develop the appropriate communicative skills and improve literacy largely depends on learner's command of the language and personal demands. This fact reveals that not all Internet websites and platforms are reliable enough to be referred to in different educational settings.

The present research into the potential of distance learning for the EFL classroom in a higher educational setting has shown that the perfect online media covering all the areas of concern has not existed yet. Modern online platforms and services advocate for the learner-centered approach to EFL teaching since it provides teachers with opportunities to create an engaging and supportive language learning environment.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to focus on integrating alternative media platforms and services in EFL teaching and learning using synchronous and asynchronous distance education. The opportunities offered by modern education technology and highly qualified instructors in EFL teaching should be effectively used to provide higher-quality education services to wider academic audiences. The evidence from this study suggests that the choice of online resources for efficient learning of a foreign language mostly depends on the concept and content of EFL education, technical characteristics of online platforms and services, their academic level, the possibility of bilateral communication, and students' needs. Furthermore, such an approach enables the teachers to mentor in a way that best reaches all their students and structure their EFL language practices to best suit their students' learning styles, interests, and abilities. The emergent online resources meeting all these criteria help eradicate unnecessary extra media like blogs, wikis, mobile programs, or apps.

Since the isolated use of any synchronous and asynchronous platform or service does not produce the desired EFL learning outcome, we have confirmed that the quintessence of effective foreign language learning is their subsequent integrated implementation into the educational environment. This practice can pave a path for developing various technological trends regarded as the core component of foreign language

teaching and boosting students' growth in all linguistic areas. The results of the present study demonstrate that despite the most educators' favourable attitude towards distance learning platforms and services such as Moodle, Google Classroom, MyEnglishLab, Zoom, Google Meet, British Council: Learn English Online, Grammarly: Free Online Writing Assistant, Teaching English with the British Council, some misconceptions and fears among academic staff still exist likely to restrain them from blending technological tools into their teaching at the expense of learners' engagement.

To further our research, we intend to focus specifically on suitable assessment methods for EFL distance learning to evaluate the students' academic achievements in the area.

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