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The Online EFL Learning Challenges in Ukrainian Tertiary Education

Oksana NIKOLENKO[1],
Maryna REBENKO[2],
Nataliia DORONINA[3],
Victor REBENKO[4]

[1] Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, o.nikolenko@knu.ua,ok.nik1997@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0469-8376
[2] Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, m.rebenko@knu.ua, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8553-3559
[3]Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, n.doronina@knu.ua,amalpheia@gmail.com, ORCID ID:0000-0002-6834-725X
[4] National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine, victor.rebenko@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3370-3760

Abstract: COVID-19 has challenged educators not only in Ukrainian universities but throughout the whole world to keep abreast with the rapid emergence of new technologies, adapt the education system to online needs, and use blended learning as a necessity of the transformed education environment.
We carried out two case studies aimed at gauging the students' perception, experience, and satisfaction level on the pandemic-induced online EFL learning via a Google Forms questionnaire in 2020-2021 a.y. and 2021-2022 a.y. at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine). The first case conducted a 16-question online survey, and an analysis unit was the responses of 112 first-year students studying English as L2 and majoring in Computer Science and Cybernetics at the University of Kyiv under the Coronavirus lockdown reality. The second case encompassed 80 respondents and was fulfilled through the same 16-question online survey under similar study conditions. The sample groups were undergraduate students of the same age (17-18 y. o.) and the English language level (B1+) enrolled in the university with similar admissions criteria, prerequisites, and curricula. The survey's participation was voluntary and anonymous. The respondents gave feedback on three question categories: EFL online learning effectiveness, technical provision satisfaction, self-organization, and confidence level. The opinions were not fully homogeneous but the majority of Computer Science and Cybernetics undergraduates in both case studies pointed out that the online EFL course was effective. The first survey findings revealed that the first-year university learners had a predominately positive attitude towards online education, describing English lessons as well-structured and engaging.
Our second investigation demonstrated that apart from staff readiness, confidence, students' Internet accessibility, and motivation, the undergraduates have indicated tiredness of online meetings, pointing out that they have a lack of live communication. The obtained study results can help in understanding EFL teachers how to continue teaching and learning during such unprecedented times and to ensure a high level of education, responding to the current students' needs and priorities for successful online classes.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic; EFL online learning; L2 performance development; students' assessment; Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.*

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 significantly affected all educational institutions, challenging them to adapt the education systems to the new online reality. As many educators admit, universities realized online transfer in a different way, completing their local institutional demands. This means not only making up strategies appropriate for special tasks but also considering that technological changes will be formatted in ways that reflect existing differences, alliances, discourses, and perspectives in every particular institution (Murgatrotd, 2020).

For educational institutions, the quick transformation to online learning has created an unexpected assignment to build e-platforms and integrate external applications into their systems promptly (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). First of all, educational staff faced difficulties in modifying course/subject contents, learning resources, and assessments to online platforms(Heng & Sol, 2020).

Although the Coronavirus has revealed advancing weaknesses in education systems throughout the world, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv made effective rapid steps to support teachers and students in acquiring digital competencies. Various policy initiatives have been launched by the university to accommodate traditional learning to online learning, including a number of online courses and projects aiming to set u familiarity with the necessary tools, teaching approaches, and online study activities. This has resulted in better planning and efficient implementation of online courses and subsequently in students' positive attitudes and involvement in the educational process. Apart from using popular video conferencing software programs like Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Pear Deck, Discord, and Google classroom, the *KNU Education Online* digital platform (https://view.genial.ly/5ecb71829330ad0d7cd6f2e5/presentation-cifrovij-universitet) was introduced on the 3d of January 2020. It started just as a student and teacher online classroom design, but the Coronavirus expansion pushed the distance learning online platform development. It enables teachers to provide necessary activities: lectures, presentations, assignments, tests, lab tasks, cases, e-literature, videos, etc.

As the COVID-19 pandemic lasts, large debates have activated the discussion of the paths that can be built thinking of the quality of the online educational process. There is no doubt that taken measures and implemented approaches during lockdowns need to be analyzed and assessed critically for further in-depth research to ensure education continuity and improvement in university online education.

Researchers worldwide are successful in developing strategies and techniques to facilitate online learning and ensure its effectiveness during the lockdown. For instance, Martin (2020) designed a set of five key domains addressed for those teachers and instructors who struggle with optimizing their online class environments. He emphasized that first, all the instructions should be explicit, properly ordered, and well-organized; next, the learning content requires high quality and should be relevant to a student's individual level. The motivational aspect above all is also under Martin's (2020) focus, i.e. a switch between online and onset activities is supposed to be regulated and organized by a learner himself to achieve longitudinal results.

The fourth suggestion relates to teacher-student contacts and inter-communication opportunities where a combination of both face-to-face instructions through various digital options and interpersonal contacts through appropriate online channels would work effectively. Finally, according to Martin (2020), it is the role of mental health that matters a lot. Significant is that both learners and their instructors should create a supportive atmosphere to feel confident and secure if any problem-solving issues arise. In Dhawan's (2020) study, the focus was drawn on how to cope with online learning challenges and minimize their negative impact. The author suggested pre-recording video materials or even full lectures to ensure all-the-time access, adapting interactive learning tools and e-learning platforms to boost students' interest and engagement. Dhawan (2020) concluded that if dynamic teaching, accessible teacher-student intercommunication, constant feedback, flexible learning opportunities, and a collaborative classroom environment all work together, then online learning would engage students to achieve higher levels and instructors – to develop materials of higher quality. Assessing the impact of the pandemic on students, education professionals fully agree that to ensure the effectiveness of online learning, first and foremost, we need to determine students' needs and expectations.

With this in mind, our study intends to get feedback from university students by asking them to identify the benefits and drawbacks of English lessons online learning and assess the efficiency of the designed online environment. Such assessment may help teachers to evaluate and modify remote learning activities and improve hybrid and online teaching formats during the post-COVID-19 period in the future.

2. Literature Review

As many educational institutions cancelled all face-to-face classes, labs, and other learning experiences to prevent the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19, a lot of researchers focused on studying the possible outcomes of online learning in new conditions.

Various investigations have been conducted concerning the impact of the 2019/2022 pandemic on the higher education sector, having a continuous discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning and its effectiveness (Adedoyin &Soykan, 2020; Al-Nofaie, 2020; Özüdoğru, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020; Naqvi & Zehra, 2020; Nugraha et al., 2021). As Keengwe and Kidd (2010) note, online teaching includes new and exciting experiences in learning for various students. The online format presents innovative educational opportunities for students who have time management problems in their learning strategies, with low anxiety, and high problem-solving effectiveness (Solimeno et.al., 2008). Among the advantages of distance learning, Brown (2017) and Nagrale (2013) mention flexibility, saving time and money while staying or working from home. Şendoğan (2020) suggests that providing recorded lessons would equip students with a flexible approach to participating in the lessons separately from time to time. İnce et al. (2020) admit that the flexibility of online learning during COVID-19 gives students more freedom to learn at their own pace and review and revise the material presented online. Some researchers explored that practicing fun and engaging activities during online learning can help raise student motivation (Morat et al., 2016, as cited in Bailey & Lee, 2020).

Meanwhile, several undoubtful drawbacks are pointed out as tech problems in online teaching including downloading errors, installation issues, problems with logging in, audio and video troubles, absence of social interactions, distractions, etc. The biggest problem remains in the implementation of online learning connected to the limited availability of the Internet for students and teachers, unutilized network technologies, and the lack of proper knowledge of modern educational platforms (Ritonga et al., 2021). Moreover, online learning can present various complications like academic integrity violation, lack of motivation, missing emotional elements of teaching, student cheating, and plagiarism because Internet resources can be right at hand for students during the tests (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Additionally, students have suffered psychologically from school closures, lack of devices to participate in courses, being unable to access online materials from home, and being unable to leave home for a long time (Apriyanti, 2020).

A number of substantial studies have been made on key challenges of online EFL (English as a foreign language) learning. Mahyoob (2020) admitted that EFL learners' satisfaction with online learning was low and less than 50% were satisfied and 43% of learners wouldn't fully support continuing online education if there happened to be another crisis at Taibah University. Assessing and providing feedback, especially writing, appeared to be the most challenging aspect for EFL teachers in Oman (Naqvi, S., & Zehra, 2020). The study at Suryakancana University showed that the learners' challenges in online learning did not undergo efficient well during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most students and teachers were not ready to respond to new problems. Interesting results for the most positively and negatively affected language skills during emergency distance education were obtained by (Karatas & Tancer, 2020). During the pandemic, teachers focused on writing skills as it was constantly used for almost all homework, assignments, and projects, but the speaking improvement was ignored. That means an obvious lack of synchronous online classes and an inability to use modern tools for online education both for faculty and staff. Faculty with little to no online teaching experience have lower perceptions of their ability in online teaching than those with more than five years' experience (Leiba & Gafni, 2021).

Concerning the Ukrainian context, there have been made certain advancements in studying online learning from the beginning of the pandemic. Shevtsova and Kozubai (2020) outlined the main tendencies and challenges of online learning in emergencies. The researchers emphasized that distance education is a crisis in its nature and it needs constant adaptation to the changing realities of the present. Stukalo and Simakhova (2020) revealed a lack of proper equipment and digital competencies for both the students and teachers, poor Internet connection, and the necessity for new approaches in organizing the classes and individual assignments. Despite the difficulties and problems, the results of the survey showed that more than 70% of students were satisfied with the quality of online education at the university. The same technical issues, psychological discomfort, and an increase in time for correspondence both for teachers and students were defined by (Prokopenko & Berezhna, 2020). Among the positive aspects, they mentioned self-discipline, the experience of mastering the latest methodology, tools for online learning, etc.

All these findings contribute to the understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of distance learning and will help educators to identify perspectives to provide better distance teaching strategies, considering the diverse needs of certain educational groups.

2.1. The purpose of this study

The study aims to assess the effectiveness of the implemented online English lessons, carried out between 2020-21 and 2021-22 a.y. to gauge the students' perception and experience in online education, comparing the first and current assessment results.

In particular, the main objective was to answer three **research questions**:

- What is the quantitative level of learners' satisfaction with the EFL online course?
- Which qualitative categories constitute students' positive feedback on distance learning?
- To what extent has students' outlook on online learning changed since 2020?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The research methodology includes both quantitative and qualitative methods, particularly frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation descriptions.

The key project approach is action research implementation.

According to O'Brien (2001), the action research paradigm is "learning by doing" aimed at identifying the problem, treating the weak points of situations, observing the results, and working out the recommendations for improvement.

3.2. Setting and Participants

One of the project methods was a case study of Computer Science and IT students, n=192, attending the same 120-hour and 2 ESTC-credit GE university course (the case), their online learning satisfaction evaluation in particular (the analysis unit). A convenience sample group of undergraduate students was selected as a relevant and statistically significant means to conduct the study. All the participants were of the same age and EL level, majoring in the same field of knowledge. This cohort was a homogeneous sample chosen because the students are enrolled in the university with similar admissions criteria, prerequisites, and curricula. The survey's participation was anonymous, voluntary, and free of charge. The aims of there search were announced after the course completion to prevent biases or unfair treatment.

3.3. Research Stages

The project stages were as follows: the 2020-2021 questionnaire, the 2021-2022 questionnaire, quantitative data analysis, and qualitative findings analysis.

The 16-question survey – 14 close-ended questions and two open-ended ones – was designed and conducted in 2020-21 a.y. and 2021-22 a.y. In the close-ended section, students were asked to choose from "absolutely disagree" to "completely agree", from "made worse" to "improved", from "poor" to "high" or from "absolutely inefficient" to "utterly efficient", etc. on different study-relevant problems. The questionnaire results were analyzed quantitatively through statistical methods, namely descriptive statistics methods. The key findings were explained qualitatively from the perspective of the students' self-assessment of their satisfaction, engagement, development, and thus, the effectiveness of online English learning.

4. Findings and Discussions

The results and discussion of the research findings were presented based on the main questions of the study as follows.

4.1. Evaluation of online lesson activities efficiency.

In one of the key survey questions, the learners were requested to rank the lesson activities they had succeeded in from the highest to the lowest. In 2020-2021 a.y., the most popular classroom activity was in-class dialogue making (60,3%), and grammar/vocabulary and listening practices were valued nearly 20 % less. In contrast, in 2021-2022 a.y., grammar/vocabulary and listening assignments achieved the highest popularity among respondents, almost 60%, whereas the dialogues and presentation designing rate was 20% less. Similarly, throughout the two study years, the learners were the least confident in delivering questions to their teachers (almost 25% and 24% respectively). The obtained data could be derived from Figure 1.

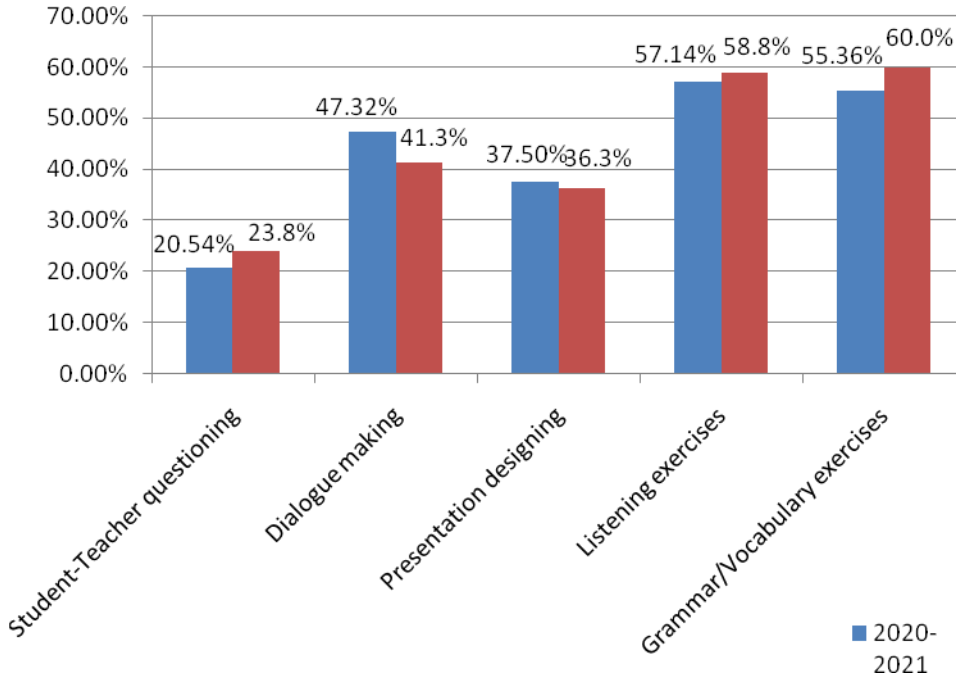


Figure 1. Students' assessment of lesson activities' effectiveness
Source: Authors' own conception

4.2. Evaluation of online English lessons means engagement.

The next questionnaire step targeted to rank the efficiency of learners' online English lesson engagement. For this reason, the list of the four most frequently practiced means of class engagement was proposed to the respondents to give feedback. As shown in Figure 3, storytelling was evaluated as the most effective teaching technique in both studies (57,5% and 43% correspondingly). While gamification workability evaluation was high in the 2020-2021 survey (50,7%), next year its effectiveness rate shrank by 20% making a shift to the higher significance of teacher-student consistent feedback implementation in online learning delivery (52%).

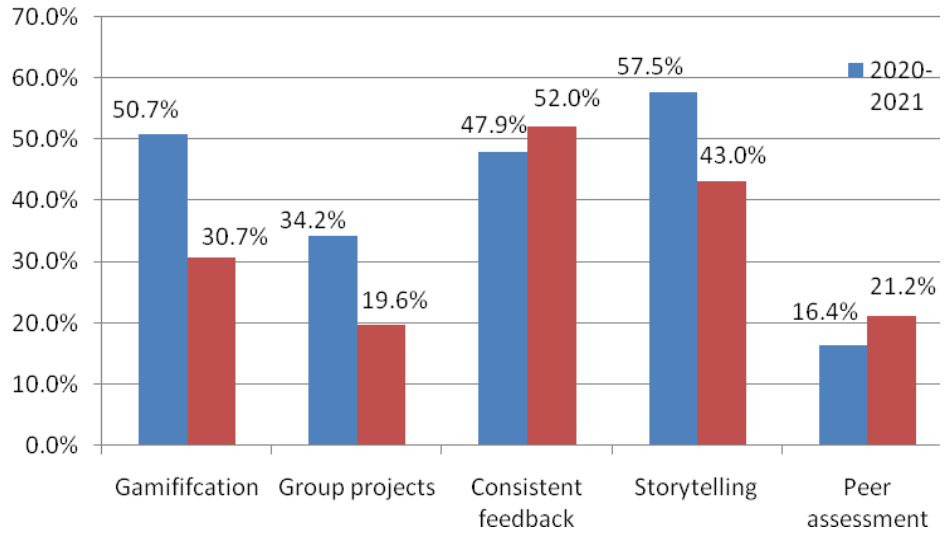


Figure 2. Students' assessment of online English lessons means engagement
Source: Authors' own conception

4.3. Evaluation of English language skills development while learning online.

As outlined in Figure 3, students' self-assessment of their English language skills development while learning online (from 1 – poor to 5 – high) was not homogeneous throughout the first and the second university closures. While in the years 2020-2021 the top three lesson activities fostering the highest rate of language skills enhancement were listening, writing, and reading (49%, 49%, and 45% correspondingly), the next year made a shift particularly to reading, listening and speaking (62%, 52%, and 49% respectively). Significant is that in 2021-2022 a.y., it was around a 1,2-time increase in each activity – reading, listening and speaking – compared to the previous year's outcomes. Only writing which was among the top three in 2020-2021 a.y. was worsened by 1,3 times in 2021-2022 a.y.

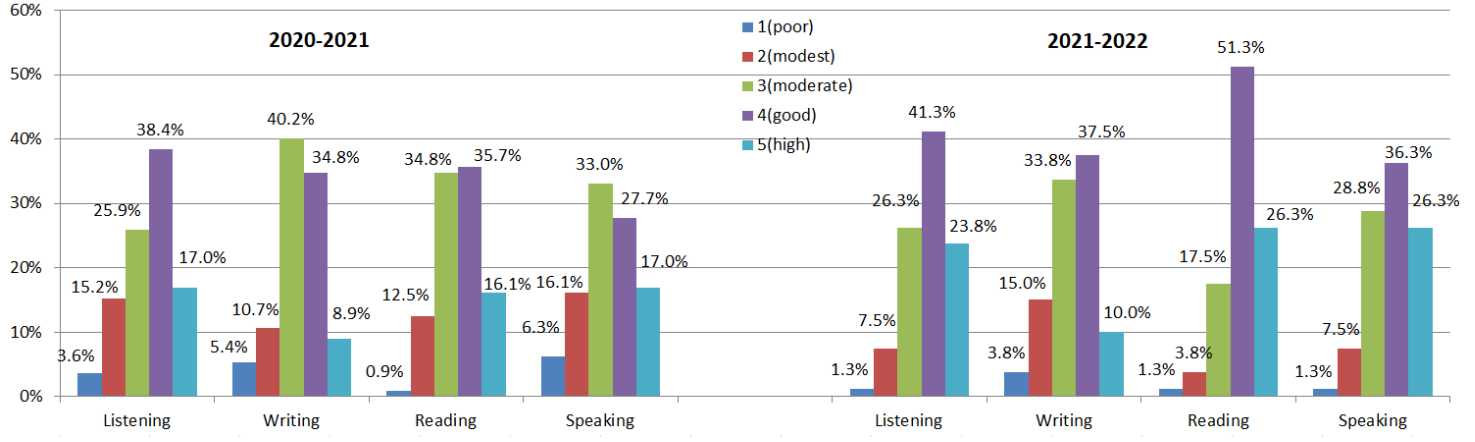


Figure 3. Students' assessment of language skills development while learning online

Source: Authors' own conception

4.4. Evaluation of online lessons' impact on students' soft skills development.

It was significant to discover whether online learning influenced students' soft skills development as well as hard skills. For this reason, we worked out three survey sub-questions targeting to analyze to what extent soft skills were affected and faced changes if any. In terms of the first sub-question, the respondents were asked whether online lessons impacted their study planning, particularly time management and self-organization, and control rate. With respect to the second survey sub-question, the participants assessed the way their communication skills were influenced, including teamwork and adaptability. Regarding the last sub-question, learners' open-mindedness development, problem-solving and critical thinking, in particular, were evaluated. To rank the impact, the students were supposed to choose from 1 point as "made worse" to 5 points indicating "improved level". Figure 4 demonstrates average values on the three aforementioned soft skills outcomes.

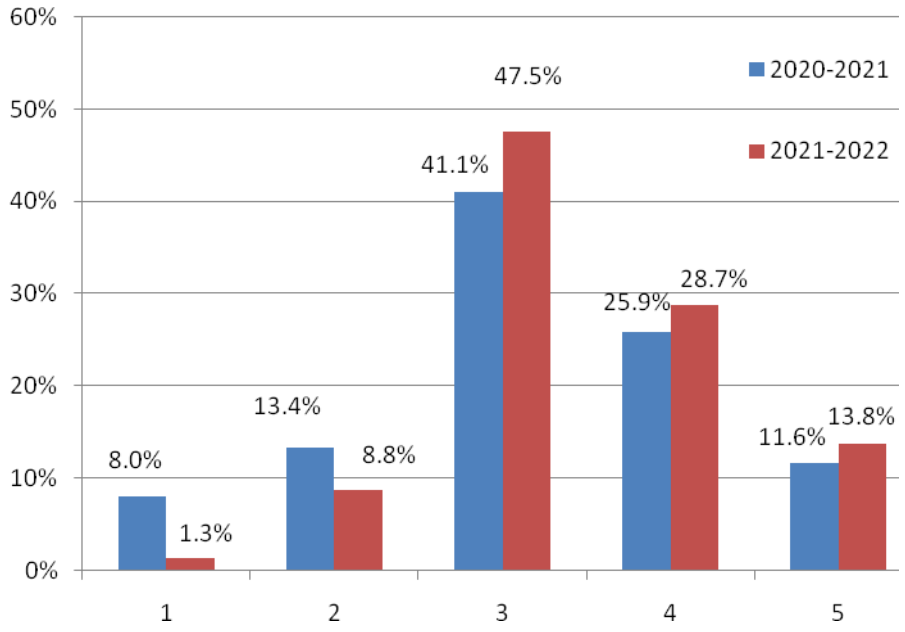


Figure 4. Students' assessment of soft skills development while learning online

Source: Authors' own conception

4.5. Evaluation of online English lessons' benefits and/or drawbacks.

In the next survey question, we asked the participants to assess online learning in terms of its upsides and/or downsides. The students ranging from 1 as "certainly more drawbacks" to 5 points as "certainly more benefits" revealed that a considerate number of respondents (68,4%) find more strengths than weak points in the 2020-2021 pandemic-pushed online classes. Regarding the data on the 2021-2022 a.y., students' assurance decreased almost 1,5 times. The comparison of the minimum and maximum values (items 1 and 5 respectively) outlines that students were almost 3,5 times more ascertained towards the perks of online learning than its shortcomings (4,1% and 13,7% correspondingly) at the first lockdown. During the second university closure, such certainty rose and showed that it became 7 times more learners considered online studying more beneficial regardless of the overall reduction in positive feedback compared to the 2020-2021 study data. The aforementioned issues are depicted in the figure below.

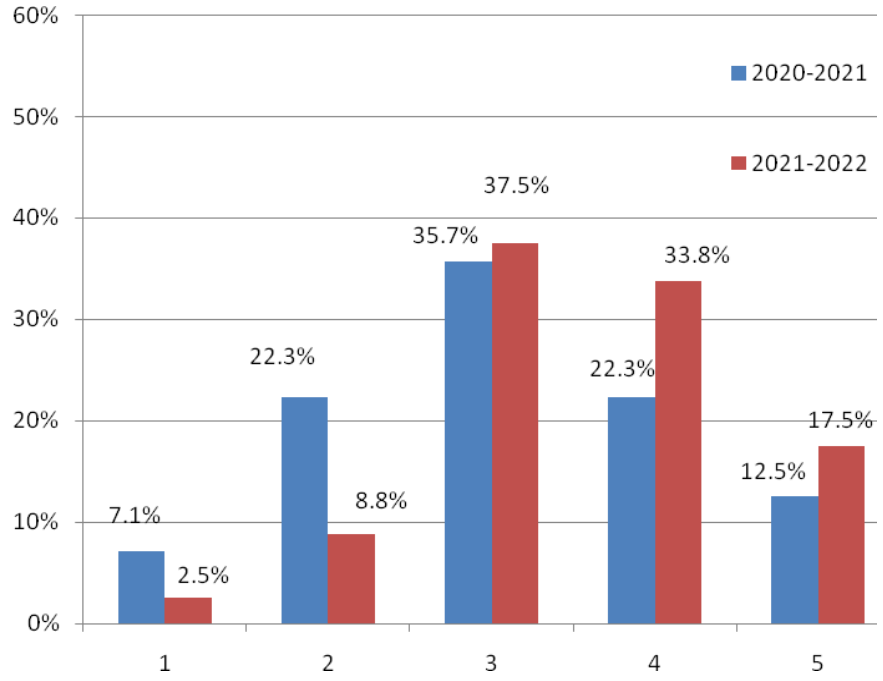


Figure 5. Students' assessment of online English lessons' benefits and/or drawbacks
Source: Authors' own conception

4.6. Respondents' opinions on the benefits or drawbacks of online learning.

In the following-up open-ended question, we asked the respondents to give details on the merits and drawbacks of online learning. The participants were certain that less study intensity, comfortable at-home learning at your own pace, and adjusting a tough university schedule into your day are top priorities of online classes. It was also figured out that remote learning is a more affordable option, as a high-quality education will be obtained at a far reduced cost due to lower additional expenses on transportation, course materials, and campus. Additionally, less time-consuming options, location independence, easier access to lecturers, and digital literacy development facilitate online learning to be beneficial for productive L2 acquisition. However, there were some opposite opinions. The participants indicated that academic dishonesty resulting in unfair assessment, less attendance control, easier skipping class opportunities, and self-discipline breaches make a new realm of student discipline violation. In addition, difficulty in focusing on material, distracting environment, and engaging in in-person interaction elimination together with an unstable Internet connection could discourage learners from being hard-working and thus, hardly contribute to effective language performance.

Excerpts from student comments:

Benefits identified by participants:

"It's less time-consuming."

"It's easier to do listening tasks online, rather than in person. It also adds interactivity to tasks."

"I find myself more comfortable sitting at home."

"There is a possibility to keep up learning track in case the person gets sick for example."

"Easier time management."

"There is a possibility to use modern technologies."

"I can choose what I study and how I spend my time.

Drawbacks identified by participants:

"There is also a great lack of live communication during the learning process."

"Sometimes it's hard to understand some material during the class due to technical problems."

"There is very little inspiration to work in online classes as in off-line classes."

"Harder to concentrate, much easier to cheat."

"I think real-life practice is the most important thing in learning a foreign language and it's not the same as speaking online."

4.7. Evaluation of the effectiveness of online English lessons.

To evaluate the respondents' attitude towards the online English lessons methodology they were asked to rank the effectiveness of online learning from 1 as absolutely inefficient to 5 points as utterly efficient. The 2020-2021 a.y. study data revealed that most respondents (69,9%) were completely satisfied with the learning methodology offered online. In terms of the 2021-2022 a.y. questionnaire the positive outcomes lowered to 45,1% for those treating the online classes as efficient and utterly efficient. The responses' data are presented in Figure 6.

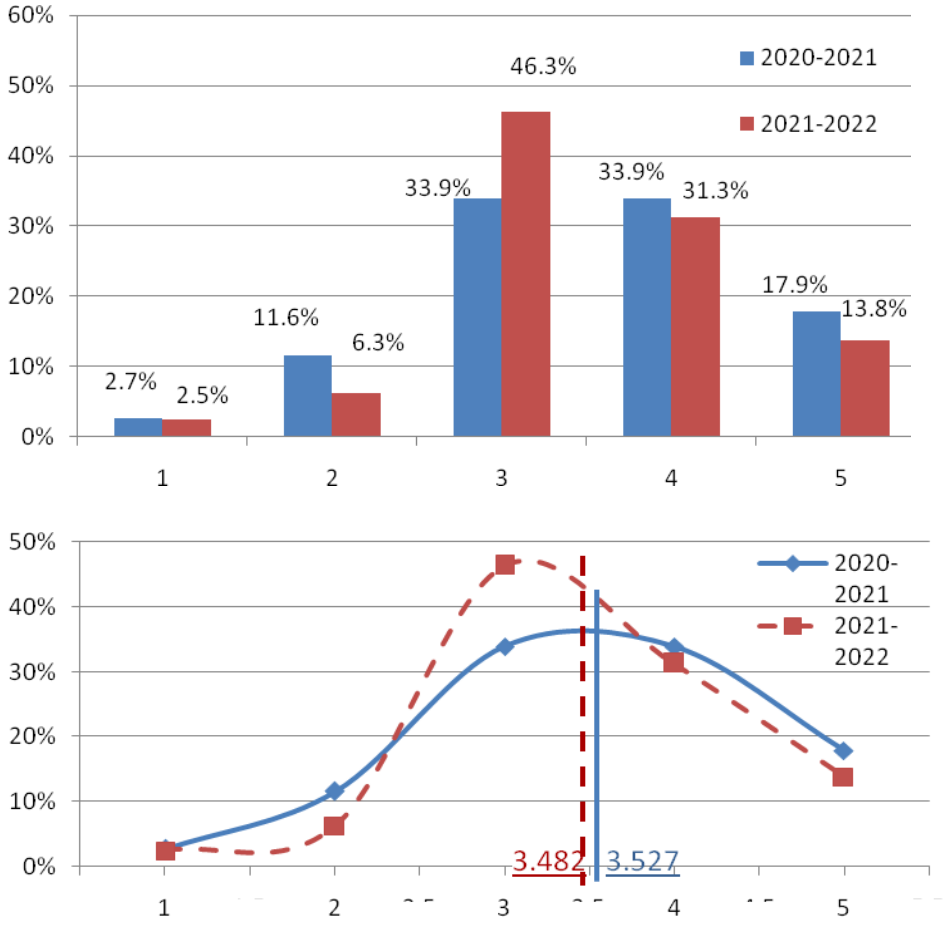


Figure 6. Students' evaluation of online English learning effectiveness
Source: Authors' own conception

4.8. Respondents' feedback on the possibility to implement changes aimed at improving online learning.

The last open-ended question allowed students to reflect deeper. The students were asked about the changes they would recommend to improve online learning. We analyzed the respondents' feedback and singled out 5 categories: complete satisfaction and no changes required (35%), practicing more speaking activities (21%,) complete dissatisfaction and urgent switch to offline learning required (15%), and better tech provision needed (9%). The last question category encompassed a few attitudes (valued 3% each (poor) gamification, teacher responsibilities, student knowledge control improvement, and less homework setting. The rest 6% of respondents were uncertain about what attitude to sharing and 1% required more teacher feedback, which, however, does not depend on the online learning methodology at all.

5. Conclusions

Our investigation was focused to define the effectiveness of online education at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv in Ukraine during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents made a response to three research question categories: EFL online learning effectiveness, technical provision satisfaction, self-organization, and confidence level. The findings revealed that the learners have a generally positive attitude towards online education in both case studies, however, the evaluation of online lessons' efficiency and as a result, students' satisfaction level was 1,5 times lower (45,1 %) than what it was in the 2020-2021 academic year. While such a decrease could be continuous and have an adverse effect on both students' language competencies and teachers' methodology, on the other hand, such quantitative data enables to activation of a qualitative shift in online learning techniques and methods.

Our study's key results that contribute to making a scientific theoretical, as well as practical advance in the field of research, suggest that firstly, EFL teachers are urged to modify traditional offline teaching methods and techniques on purpose and adapt them to the on-demand online learning expertise to engage students. In addition, educators should direct more of their attention to incorporating and encouraging learners' on-the-spot feedback through interactive tools, gamified activities, self- or peer-assessed tasks, lesson content reviews, web-based polls, etc aimed at creating not only efficient learning practices but also teachers' support. Finally, EFL teachers should experience constant training to deliver a proper online

learning framework and best meet students' needs. All these outcomes would prevent teachers from struggling to embrace productive online learning and advanced teaching approaches, ensure learners' language competence enhancement and soft skills boost, and no less importantly, foster educators', as well as their students', digital literacy development.

The obtained data enables us to conclude that adopting an online learning practice isn't just a technical but also a pedagogical and methodological challenge. It is vital to prepare teaching materials and activities responding to the student's needs and priorities for successful language competencies development.

Future research may examine other potential online learning approaches that might influence the growth of learners' language and professional competency.

Acknowledgment

All the authors contributed to the conception and design of the research, and were equally engaged in the data collection, namely – Oksana Nikolenko made a substantial conceptual contribution, developed Questionnaires and provided a final factual review, Natalia Doronina worked on the literature sources, Maryna Rebenko conducted the data analysis, and Victor Rebenko created the tables and figures, and also performed technical editing. My thanks to the research participants for generously giving their time and sharing their willingness.

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