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Krisztián Váradi*

Trainee Lecturer

Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education

90202, 6 Kossuth Sq., Berehove, Ukraine

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7554-4158>

English language teachers' experiences with the first transition to online education during COVID-19

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Abstract. Teaching English as a foreign language is important in the 21st century. However, as a result of the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequential quarantine measures in March 2020, the education process had to be reorganised from the traditional face-to-face method to the online space within a few days. English teachers had to face previously not experienced problems all over the world. The purpose of this study was to shed light on the main obstacles that emerged during the first transition to digital education in the spring of 2020. With the help of semi-structured interviews, sixteen English language teachers were asked from various Transcarpathian secondary and higher education institutions about their experiences with online education and the useful practices which helped them overcome the most serious problems. Based on the results, the personal contact between teachers and learners was important in the development of speaking skills in a foreign language. Although online education was rather convenient and advantageous in terms of developing listening, reading, or writing skills, distance education was not as effective as the traditional face-to-face context. Several problems emerged in connection with the demotivation of students, the overload of both teachers and learners, the lack of the Internet connection or digital equipment, and the unpreparedness of teachers and educational institutions. The practical significance of this study is that it gives possible solutions to these issues and hindrances, thus teaching English in the online space could be more effective

Keywords: online learning; coronavirus disease; teaching English as a foreign language; Transcarpathia; digital education; face-to-face education

*Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology has always played an important role in teaching English. In the last century, audio and video recordings were played to language learners with the help of televisions and cassette recorders, but due to technological progress in the first two decades of the 20th century, teachers and students have much more modern tools at their disposal (smartphones, MP3 players, tablet computers). The needs of 21st century students have changed, as they are born into the age of digital technologies and the Internet, and this fact cannot be neglected by teachers when planning the educational process.

Due to mobile-assisted language learning, students can learn foreign languages anywhere and anytime on their

smartphones, laptops, or any other wireless devices. However, many teachers prefer the conservative ways of language teaching because they are afraid of changes (Váradi & Hladonik, 2023). Nevertheless, technology offers a great deal of advantages both for learners and teachers. Just one example is the teaching of pronunciation: by using a speaker and a laptop or a smartphone, teachers have many opportunities to use audio-visual teaching aids in their lessons, thus supporting the language acquisition process of their learners (Altun, 2015). Language education supported by technology has become a decisive role in the recent period, because in the spring of 2020 quarantine measures were introduced in the whole world as a result of the



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coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), and the use of technology in language education became inevitable (Al-Ataby, 2020). The necessity of suspending in-person education led to the widespread adoption of synchronous and asynchronous online teaching (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). Teachers had to get accustomed to virtual learning environments that were unfamiliar to most of them. In addition, both teachers and learners had to cope with the social and psychological effects of the pandemic on their daily lives (MacIntyre *et al.*, 2020).

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, video conferencing technologies have become the most important tools in the teaching process at all levels of the education system. In order to conduct online lessons, it has become necessary to use programmes such as Zoom or Skype, through which the lessons can be conducted via the Internet in the presence of the teacher, but it is also important to have social interaction between students (Maher, 2020). A shift of responsibility came with the obligatory transition to distance education. Teachers had to encourage students to produce original work alone, so learners were responsible for their own learning and teachers were functioning only as facilitators of knowledge acquisition (Beatty, 2021). In order to get a better understanding of the main problems of the process of the first transition to online teaching during the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted with English language teachers. The purpose of this research was to assess the attitudes and opinions of teachers in connection with teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) through online education in Transcarpathian secondary schools and higher education institutions.

The research was carried out according to the following hypotheses. 1. Development of students' language skills was more difficult to achieve in the framework of online education, as the process of learning a foreign language requires personal contact between the teacher and the learner, and the presence and guidance of the teacher. 2. Language teachers have acquired many new technology-related skills and have adapted to the world of the Internet to a greater extent in the past period, thus the possible retransition to digital education will take place much more smoothly in the future.

The originality of the research results lies in the examination of the first transition to digital education because an insight can be gained into the beginning of online English language education in Transcarpathia, thereby learning more about the factors that made this transition from in-person to online teaching difficult, so that the possible solutions can be discovered.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was designed in a qualitative setting because detailed information had to be collected from a relatively limited number of subjects. The data collection method used in the study followed the form of semi-structured oral interviews. The interview questions covered the next topics: applications and devices used by English teachers; difficulties in transitioning to online education; advantages and disadvantages of digital education; the possibilities of improving language skills in the online space; learners' attitudes towards learning English in distance education; the importance of personal contact; newly developed skills and professional knowledge in the field of technology-enhanced language teaching.

The stratified sampling procedure was used to determine the participants of the research. The selected teachers had different levels of teaching experience and taught English in various districts of Transcarpathia, in different types of secondary and higher education institutions. After data recording, the answers were transcribed, and with the help of content analysis, the obtained information was discussed topically. Interviews were conducted with a total of sixteen English language teachers. Some of the conversations took place in person, while other interviews were conducted through online video meetings, due to the health condition and easier availability of the respondents. After obtaining prior permission, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed in written form. The interviews consisted of twenty-one questions. After recording the answers, thirty-nine pages of data (around 10,750 words) were collected as the basis of the research. Writing down the answers verbatim allowed accurately quoting the words of the interviewed teachers when presenting the results. The provisions of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) were followed during data processing.

The primary factor considered in choosing participants was their involvement in teaching English through digital distance education amid the global quarantine implemented in March 2020. Some teachers possessed only one or two years of experience as novice language educators, while others had several decades of teaching experience. Nine of the participants were employed at either a grammar school or a lyceum. From an administrative standpoint, the language instructors taught in different districts of Transcarpathia, including Berehove, Mukachevo, Vynohradiv, and Velyka Byihany. In the context of higher education, interviews were carried out with seven English language educators affiliated with a college operating in the Berehove district. The details about the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The most important characteristics of the interviewees

Code	Gender	Teaching experience (years)	Place of work (district)	Type of school	Form of interview
SE1	Female	20	Berehove	Lyceum	Online
SE2	Female	16.5	Berehove	Lyceum	Personal
SE3	Female	19	Vynohradiv	Lyceum	Online

Table 1. Continued

Code	Gender	Teaching experience (years)	Place of work (district)	Type of school	Form of interview
SE4	Female	2	Berehove	Grammar school	Online
SE5	Male	2	Mukachevo	Lyceum	Online
SE6	Female	2.5	Mukachevo	Lyceum	Personal
SE7	Male	1	Berehove	Lyceum	Personal
SE8	Male	1.5	Berehove	Lyceum	Online
SE9	Female	1.5	Velyka Byihani	Grammar school	Personal
HE1	Male	6	Berehove	College	Personal
HE2	Female	24	Berehove	College	Online
HE3	Male	15	Berehove	College	Online
HE4	Male	18	Berehove	College	Personal
HE5	Female	25	Berehove	College	Online
HE6	Male	22	Berehove	College	Personal
HE7	Female	20	Berehove	College	Personal

Source: compiled by the author

To safeguard the anonymity of the individuals involved in the study, neither their names nor their educational institutions were incorporated. Instead, codes were employed to identify them uniquely. Specifically, the code SE1 signifies that the individual is the first participant from secondary education establishments, whereas the code HE1 identifies the first interviewee from the realm of higher education.

RESULTS

The information derived from interviews with sixteen educators of English as a foreign language will be showcased here, categorised according to various topics. The focus of these themes or topics is to depict the landscape of online education in Transcarpathia and elucidate the dynamics of foreign language instruction during the quarantine period. Nevertheless, due to the limited size of the research sample, it is impractical to extrapolate overarching conclusions from the gathered findings.

1) Digital devices and online applications used in teaching EFL

In secondary education institutions, the availability of digital devices for teachers was limited. Consequently, language educators frequently relied on their personal laptops or smartphones during English lessons. This was particularly necessary due to the curriculum's inclusion of activities such as listening to English songs and audio materials featuring native speakers' speech, utilised in lower grades. Some lyceums had adequately equipped information technology (IT) classrooms with interactive whiteboards and overhead projectors. These resources enabled teachers to present instructional material more efficiently, facilitating the incorporation of educational videos. Higher education institutions showcased a notable distinction as instructors had widespread access to technology in almost every college classroom. Online education brought about advantages, such as the increased frequency of educators presenting videos related to lesson topics. An English language teacher (SE1) remarked: "During distance

education, I incorporated audio and video recordings several times a week. Almost every lesson included a short video for the students".

Digital applications like Google Classroom, Viber, Gmail, Zoom, and Messenger were commonly employed for communication with learners. However, the situation for first-grade pupils posed challenges, as their young age required the involvement of parents in online classes, demanding considerable organisational efforts from teachers. In the online learning environment of higher education, language instructors utilised platforms like Zoom and Google Meet for video lectures, complemented by supporting materials uploaded to Google Classroom. PowerPoint presentations were frequently employed to illustrate theoretical course content, and testing took place on various platforms, with Redmenta emerging as the most successful choice. "When the quarantine began, catching us off-guard, we initially used familiar apps, reaching out to students via Messenger and Facebook. Compiling the first test with Redmenta took a full day, because I previously compiled my test sheets only as simple Word documents" (HE3).

2) Problems that complicated the first transition (with proposed solutions)

During the spring of 2020, students initially did not focus on learning online as they saw the global quarantine as a period of relaxation. In the beginning, teachers found themselves unprepared for the methodologies and applications required for online curriculum delivery, having previously only engaged in traditional face-to-face teaching. The lack of preparation added complexity to the situation, unfolding abruptly. "Unpreparedness made the situation difficult; everything happened suddenly. One day we were teaching in the classroom, but the next day everything was online. Methodologically, the programmes to be used had not yet been planned, so we had to experiment with everything" (SE5). The significant challenges arising from the swift transition to digital distance education, along with potential solutions, are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Issues of the first transition to digital teaching (solutions included)

Problems	Potential solutions
Unpreparedness	Exploring innovative approaches and gaining practical experience. Adhering to a schedule organised by the institution, utilising Google Classroom, and employing video conferencing software.
Lack of IT knowledge	Conducting preparatory sessions for both teachers and students. Integrating the methodology of digital language instruction into the curricula of teacher training courses.
Internet and power outages	Students access virtual classes from their classmates' homes. Distributing course materials in written format for those unable to attend.
Lack of digital devices	Establishing a good relationship with parents, scheduling time of using digital devices within the family in case of multiple siblings.
Negative attitude of learners	Fostering motivation for learning English, issuing reminders for deadlines, presenting engaging assignments, and maintaining consistent communication with both parents and learners.
The difficulty of objective assessment	Implementing online forms and specialised programmes for assessment and testing, customised tasks, soliciting handwritten solutions, and establishing clear time frames for completing test sheets.

Source: compiled by the author

“Online education had a rough start. It began on March 12, but the organisation of Classroom assignments was only achieved by the end of April. Despite my efforts to communicate, numerous students were unaware of my messages and the existence of our institutional Facebook group. Also, the process of correcting and personally responding to each student's submission proved to be highly time-consuming” (SE3). “Conducting lessons via video call with young children posed its own set of difficulties. While parents assisted in initiating the calls, maintaining the attention of the children for the entire 40-minute duration of a lesson proved challenging. Consequently, lessons often had to be limited to around 20 minutes due to the children's limited attention spans” (SE9). “The abrupt shift to online education caught teachers unprepared. In contrast, the autumn quarantine of 2020 presented a different scenario, as both students and teachers were more experienced. In addition, teacher training has undergone modifications, with the inclusion of online language teaching in the methodological training for prospective educators” (HE5).

3) Advantages and disadvantages of digital education compared to face-to-face teaching

As per the feedback from the participants, online teaching offered the following benefits:

- more vibrant and engaging tasks, along with interactive materials;
- opportunity for shy students to experience more success;
- development of autonomous learning skills;
- it was convenient to teach and learn from home, so the chance of getting sick with covid-19 was lower;
- expansion of its skills;
- students with illness or travel problems could also join online lessons;
- learners could easily find materials in the virtual classroom.

According to language instructors' perspectives, the drawbacks of online education comprised:

- challenges of objective assessment and testing due to numerous opportunities for cheating on tests;

- insufficiency of personal interaction essential for the acquisition of language skills;
- younger pupils needed the teacher's presence and guidance;
- difficulties in establishing contact with parents and lower-grade pupils;
- learners displaying inactivity and a lack of engagement;
- certain students faced challenges with a poor internet connection;
- not all learners were able to participate in online lessons due to the limited availability of digital devices;
- correcting and evaluating a large number of written assignments was time-consuming;
- occasional overload of learners;
- each student had to be given a personalised task.

“During the examination period, I could not check whether someone was helping to the given student or not. Sometimes I requested them to raise their hands or look away from the screen. During those instances, they were unable to correctly answer my questions. However, as soon as they redirected their focus to the monitor, they promptly knew the answers. Students possess a variety of smart devices. Yet, when testing occurs at a considerable distance, such as 50 or 100 kilometres from the instructor, there is no means of verifying the test-takers' identities or monitoring whether questions are being discussed collaboratively in a group” (HE7).

4) The efficiency of distance education in language learning

As per insights from interviewed language instructors, digital education facilitates the development of all language skills, but educators must be mindful of the limitations inherent in the online environment. While receptive language skills like reading and listening comprehension can be relatively easily developed, the situation becomes more nuanced when it comes to productive skills. The primary challenge with writing skills lies in creating personalised tasks for each student to prevent copying solutions from one another. In connection with vocabulary acquisition,

challenges arise in learning the correct pronunciation of words since teachers cannot provide immediate support when learners read English texts at home. This becomes especially problematic in interpreting ambiguous words. One interviewee shared a personal approach to learning new words, emphasising the importance of providing pronunciation in familiar letters rather than using phonetic symbols, which may be difficult for children to comprehend. "When learning new words, I wrote down the English word and next to it in brackets the pronunciation with Hungarian and Ukrainian letters. Based on the official education policy, phonetic symbols have to be used, but I think that small children would not have been able to understand those signs anyway" (SE9). Speaking skills development in online education is rather challenging.

While speaking in English during online classes is possible, it is time-consuming, and actively engaging all participants in the conversation poses difficulties. Moreover, the situation is compounded by a significant number of learners either not attending online lessons or not turning on their cameras. Researchers explored the hurdles of developing speaking skills in online teaching, with suggestions such as N. Cowie's (2021) recommendation of using Flipgrid – an application enabling learners to create and share short videos with peers. "Face-to-face education was better because everyone was in the classroom, and it was much easier to divide the students into groups and have them speak in pairs" (SE6). Suggested methods of developing language skills with the help of online education are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Development of language skills with distance learning

Language skills	Benefits	Drawbacks
Reading	Online reading comprehension tasks; interesting online tests; interactivity.	Absence of teacher clarification; challenges in articulating and understanding unfamiliar terms.
Listening comprehension	Uploading audio materials; watching videos and movie clips in English.	No drawbacks.
Speaking	Possibility of communicating with students in the framework of online video conferences.	The audio quality in a video call did not reflect the characteristics of live speech; reduced attendance at online classes; it was problematic to use pair or group work, and to get students to speak; lack of nonverbal cues.
Writing	Quick check of suspected plagiarism, no problems with reading students' handwriting.	Mutual sharing of documents and task solutions; written assignments sourced from the Internet.
Vocabulary development	Vocabulary could be expanded by watching films and videos in English.	It was difficult to correct students' pronunciation when learning new words; fewer opportunities to check learners' knowledge of the newly learnt words.

Source: compiled by the author

Based on the responses from teachers, the feasibility of learning English in an online setting with limited personal interaction largely hinged on individual students. While some learners managed to independently acquire language skills using dedicated language learning applications, their effectiveness as language users had limitations if they did not apply the newly acquired words through practical exercises. To ensure a lasting enhancement of learners' language proficiency, engaging in pair work, group tasks, offering explanations, fostering classroom communication, and establishing personal contact between teachers and learners were deemed necessary. However, these elements could only be effectively implemented within the context of face-to-face education.

5) Students' attitude towards distance education

Educators involved in the study endeavoured to inspire students to engage with language learning through a variety of diverse and captivating tasks. Alongside the customary writing and listening exercises, they incorporated more interactive educational tools, such as videos from YouTube, interactive exercises, online presentations, and quiz platforms. "Learners were encouraged to seek assistance beyond regular school hours by sending messages. The unique challenge of communicating solely in English

provided a sense of accomplishment when students were able to effectively engage with the teacher" (SE1). In many instances, disinterest, inactivity, and demotivation were prevalent among learners, with only a few teachers reporting positive experiences. The ease of completing assignments from home, coupled with increased cheating opportunities, led to a lack of diligence in online education. Some learners were either absent from lessons or, if present, chose not to turn on their webcams, hindering instructors from monitoring their participation.

"Initially, I established a private Facebook group for each college group, and our communication was maintained through Messenger. However, certain students believed that remaining absent for extended periods would not have consequences. Despite sending assignment notifications via messages, their lack of interest in completing tasks resulted in a few learners withdrawing from the college. The situation has significantly improved since everyone has been assigned a personalised institutional email address. This allows for seamless inclusion in Google Classrooms, eliminating excuses for non-participation" (HE1). A significant burden on learners was the high volume of written assignments. The extended period of staying home, coupled with limited social interactions, adversely affected

some students. Consequently, many welcomed the return to in-person education in September 2020. The home environment often proved distracting, making it challenging to conduct comprehensive lessons, particularly for younger pupils in grades 1-4. Teacher presence and guidance were deemed essential, even for older college students with a greater degree of autonomous learning skills, reinforcing the importance of teaching English in traditional classroom settings. "After we continued teaching through the traditional in-person instruction, there was a significant transformation in the students' behaviour; the presence of the instructor markedly increased their motivation. This factor holds considerable influence in shaping the dynamics of the teaching process" (HE6).

6) How has the shift to remote learning evolved since the spring of 2020?

Through exposure to online education, instructors acquired familiarity with various new programmes and online tools. They gained proficiency in utilising Google Classroom, conducting effective online classes through platforms like Zoom and Google Meet, and experimented with diverse types of tasks. This increased expertise in educational technology has diminished teachers' fear of incorporating digital devices in the classroom. According to their perspectives, the integration of educational software is anticipated to streamline their work in the future. "I have experienced when, how and what to teach and expect from students" (SE4). Online communication channels through which teachers could establish contact with both students and parents had been developed. Language educators addressed the most urgent challenges in foreign language instruction during remote learning, employing innovative approaches such as new methods of preparing tests, personalised assignments, and various synchronous and asynchronous language teaching tasks. As stated by the participants, the IT and pedagogical knowledge gained during the quarantine period would significantly facilitate a potential future transition to distance education.

"Since September 2020, the adoption of Google Classroom has become mandatory for us, irrespective of whether the instruction is conducted online or in the classroom. All students are enrolled using their institutional email addresses, and the procedures for submitting assignments and conducting tests on Redmenta have been preserved as well" (HE3). The information obtained from sixteen teachers of English as a foreign language provides insight into the use of digital technologies in the teaching and learning process in Transcarpathia. It was found that many secondary schools have limited access to digital devices for teachers and they often use their own laptops and smartphones.

Lyceums have more technical facilities, such as interactive whiteboards and projectors. In particular, the use of Google Classroom in higher education institutions has been made mandatory since September 2020, which has become a standard regardless of the form of education – online or in the classroom. Online communication channels for teachers, students and parents have also been developed, which facilitates the solution of organisational problems and maintains communication in the educational process. To summarise, the implementation of online education has given teachers a variety of skills and exposure to different digital tools. Proficiency in platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and Google Meet allows teachers to effectively deliver online lessons and experiment with different types of assignments. Increased expertise in educational technology has reduced teachers' fear of using digital devices in the classroom. According to the participants, the IT and pedagogical knowledge gained during the quarantine will greatly facilitate a possible transition to distance education in the future.

DISCUSSION

Digital distance learning is a form of education in which students are not physically present in the classroom, but only interact with instructors through electronic communication channels. In the past, online education was seen as a practical solution for adult learners who wanted to study in higher education (Lockee, 2021). As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, face-to-face education was discontinued in almost all educational institutions in the world, being replaced by virtual classrooms and the online educational environment (Daniel, 2020). The most fundamental learning environment is face-to-face or in-person education, the essence of which is that the only source of information for students is available through interaction with the teacher (Ollé, 2016). The importance of the traditional classroom environment was also emphasised in the study because it has many benefits in language teaching compared to online education. The most beneficial educational method in the post-pandemic era would be a mixture of traditional and online modes of education, i.e., blended learning. The new online learning experience was not teacher-centred anymore because education became more interactive and student-centred during the COVID-era. Therefore, by the use of digital technology and different online activities, the educational process can be more effective in the future (Li, 2022). Also, teachers gathered enough experience to make a possible transition to online education much smoother in the future. The advantages and disadvantages of online video lessons are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Advantages and disadvantages of online classes

Online video lessons		
Benefits	Drawbacks	
Enhanced cooperation between educators and students	Students' attention is more divided in the online space	
Facilitating communication between learners	Entertainment options (social networking websites)	

Table 4. Continued

Online video lessons	
Benefits	Drawbacks
Sick students can also take part in classes	Absence of nonverbal cues
Guest presenters have the option to participate in the sessions as well	Lack of experience with online education
The recordings of lessons allow for easy repetition, as well as making the course material available for absent students	The instructor's focus is split during the online class, as multiple tasks need to be managed simultaneously through the monitor

Source: compiled by the author based on D. Levy (2020)

The conventional educational scene is the school classroom, where the teacher's task is to promote the learners' effective acquisition of knowledge. The most important benefits of face-to-face education include the possibility of social interaction between the learners and the teachers, as a result of which students are more active in the lessons (Nikolopoulou, 2022). During the first transition to digital education, problems emerged in connection with the demotivation and disengagement of students. Social interaction was considered as an important aspect of the development of children's speaking skills. In addition, the quarantine period and the constant isolation had a negative effect on their performance and attitude in relation to learning from home. When online education was introduced, the entire educational process had to be reorganised into the digital space within a few days. The parents had an even greater responsibility than before, as they had to ensure that their children studying at home could properly participate in online lessons. This was especially true in the case of families with several children or with pupils studying in elementary school, as it was emphasised by Á. Engler (2020). Pupils from lower grades could only connect to online video lessons with the help of their parents, and teachers faced many difficulties when trying to contact them.

The rapid transition to online education meant that instructors had to rapidly develop new skills in connection with online course design. This transition was difficult not only for the educators, but also for the learners and their parents (Tanasijević & Janković, 2021). Students had to get accustomed to the relatively new virtual environment. They had to learn how to manage their own time successfully, thus it was more difficult to discipline themselves during online lessons and to prepare every assignment on time. These difficulties were also mentioned by S. Sumardi & D. Nugrahani (2021). The perceived benefits of online lessons included the improvement of learners' digital learning skills, the ability of being connected even during the difficult times of social distancing, the development of autonomous learning skills, and the improvement of teachers' IT skills. The challenges of online lessons were the following: issues of rapid adaptation to the new situation, time-management problems, the distraction of social media, the lack of personal contact, the problem of objective evaluation, demotivation, and technological obstacles. Both teachers and educational institutions were caught off-guard when they had to rearrange in-person education into the online space within an extremely short period of time.

Immediately after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person education was replaced by digital distance learning, but teachers were free to choose from a variety of online education platforms. Online test making programmes, video calling software and virtual classrooms, such as Google Classroom, have become increasingly more common (Námesztovszki *et al.*, 2020). In Transcarpathia, teachers tried to rely firstly on familiar applications. They connected students through Messenger, and formed Facebook groups to upload the materials. However, it was not effective because many students did not know about the existence of such groups or they tried to act like they did not receive the teachers' messages. To solve this problem, the use of Google Classroom remained in many educational institutions, and an institutional system of email addresses were introduced to both teachers and students, through which the addition of learners to virtual classrooms became easier.

C. Hodges *et al.* (2020) used the term emergency remote teaching (ERT) to refer to the situation that was caused by COVID-19 in early 2020. ERT is defined as an alternative method of teaching that becomes necessary in a crisis situation. After the emergency situation has ceased to exist, education can be continued in its original form. However, some researchers also emphasised the need for online education even in the post-COVID-19 era (Camilleri, 2021). Most studies dealing with ERT are mainly concerned with tertiary education and focus on the effects of the pandemic on English-speaking countries (Akbana *et al.*, 2021). For this reason, it was interesting to investigate how such an emergency situation was handled in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. Taking into consideration the Ukrainian context, I. Huszti *et al.* (2022) conducted a case study with 34 higher education teachers in Ukraine with the aim of investigating the success of distance education during the first two quarantine periods in 2020. The researchers found that most educators perceived the rapid transition to online learning as a negative experience, but they believed that their students had a more positive perception. The reason for this is that young learners were born in the digital age, while the use of technology has caused more problems for older teachers. Furthermore, there was little or no interaction between students during synchronous online classes, and it was really important to provide both written and oral feedback for them.

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caught many tertiary education institutions off-guard. Previously, Ukrainian universities had to switch to online education

due to the spread of the flu epidemic in 2009, and due to low temperatures in 2015 and 2016. However, the rapid and obligatory transition in the spring of 2020 was much more challenging, and it is still present at some territories in the country as a result of the Russian occupation. There are no universal approaches or centralised platforms for online education, so universities, departments, and tutors have a freedom of choice in the methods and programmes used during distance education (Shevchenko *et al.*, 2021). In a different study, A. Melnychenko & T. Zheliaskova (2021) also found that Ukrainian university students perceived distance learning positively. They would like to keep online education in the country even after the pandemic was over. However, online education is a relatively new phenomenon in Ukraine. Due to the current political turmoil, the lack of a formalised system of distance education, and a lack of emphasis on life-long learning all pose a serious threat on the efficiency of post-COVID-19 education in the country (Shcherbachenko & Sluisarenko, 2023). In summary, it can be stated that learners viewed the quarantine period as an opportunity to relax and they did not take online education seriously because they had wide access to various online resources when completing tests and assignments. Teachers had to make efforts to successfully motivate their students to learn English. It was especially hard to teach the correct pronunciation of words and to develop the speaking skills of learners, but educators managed to find the perfect ways to conduct online lessons effectively and to give personalised assignments to EFL learners. As a result, later transitions to distance teaching were much less problematic, and both teachers and students became more accustomed to online education.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study dealt with the examination of the possibilities and difficulties of English language teaching in digital distance education in Transcarpathia, based on the experiences and attitudes of sixteen foreign language teachers. The results proved that the lack of prior experience and the novelty of digital education made it very difficult to re-organise education in the online space during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Transcarpathia. Although, in the opinion of the respondents, online education had its advantages, personal contact and communication between the teacher and learners were essential for the practical acquisition of a foreign language, therefore, the impersonality of the digital space did not allow the development of speaking skills and the implementation of language teaching from a communicative perspective.

Among the advantages of online education were mainly convenience aspects, as it became possible to teach and learn from home, and students who were sick or lived far away from the educational institution could also participate in online lessons. In addition, teachers had the opportunity to use videos and interactive tasks related to the curriculum to motivate students, but digital education required a high degree of independence and autonomous learning skills from learners, which made the process of language learning difficult for many of them. In the past four years, teachers have gained a lot of experience in the management of technologies and the use of programmes that implement online education, so in their opinion they already have the right foundations to ensure an effective and smooth transition to digital education. In addition, educational institutions are also much more prepared, as it may become necessary to suspend face-to-face education at any time depending on the current political situation in Ukraine. Several teachers noted that the online uploading of course materials and the use of Google Classroom will remain unchanged, so the introduction of distance education at all levels of the education system can now be implemented almost without hindrance. As a result of the study, a short insight was gained into teacher attitudes regarding English language teaching in distance education, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of this modern segment of education. Furthermore, based on the opinions of foreign language teachers, the study shed light on the extent to which the English language could be acquired with limited personal contact between teachers and students. The results of the research will provide useful advice to foreign language teachers, which will facilitate the development of language skills and the management of the educational process in the online space. In connection with prospects for further research, those factors should be examined that contribute to learner engagement and motivation in online EFL courses. This could involve the investigation of the role of instructor presence, peer interaction, gamification, and personalised learning experiences in fostering motivation and participation among EFL learners.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Крістіан Вараді

Викладач-стажист

Закарпатський угорський інститут імені Ференца Ракоці II

90202, площа Кошута, 6, м. Берегове, Україна

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7554-4158>

Досвід вчителів англійської мови з першим переходом на онлайн-навчання під час COVID-19

Анотація. Викладання англійської мови як іноземної є надзвичайно актуальним у 21 столітті. Проте внаслідок раптового спалаху пандемії COVID-19 і відповідних карантинних заходів у березні 2020 року навчальний процес довелося за кілька днів перевести з традиційного очного методу на онлайн-простір. Вчителям англійської мови довелося зіткнутися з проблемами, які раніше не виникали в усьому світі. На Закарпатті вчителі раніше не мали досвіду онлайн-навчання, що ще більше ускладнювало ситуацію. Метою цього дослідження було пролити світло на основні перешкоди, які виникли під час першого переходу на цифрову освіту навесні 2020 року. За допомогою напівструктуркованих інтерв'ю шістьнадцять вчителів англійської мови з різних середніх та вищих навчальних закладів Закарпаття опитали про їхній досвід онлайн-освіти та хороші практики, які допомогли їм подолати найсерйозніші проблеми. Виходячи з отриманих результатів, особистий контакт між викладачем і учнями є особливо важливим для розвитку навичок мовлення іноземною мовою. Хоча онлайн-навчання є досить зручним і вигідним з точки зору розвитку навичок аудіювання, читання чи письма, дистанційне навчання не настільки ефективне, як традиційне очне навчання. Викладачі мають можливість використовувати відео та інтерактивні завдання, пов'язані з навчальною програмою, щоб мотивувати учнів, але цифрова освіта вимагає від учнів високого ступеня незалежності та автономних навичок навчання, що ускладнює процес вивчення мови для багатьох із них. Виникло декілька проблем у зв'язку з демотивацією студентів, перевантаженням як викладачів, так і учнів, відсутністю підключення до Інтернету чи цифрового обладнання, непідготовленістю викладачів та навчальних закладів. Практична цінність цього дослідження полягає в тому, що воно дає можливі рішення цих проблем і перешкод, тому викладання англійської мови в онлайн-просторі може бути більш ефективним

Ключові слова: онлайн-навчання; коронавірусна хвороба; викладання англійської мови як іноземної; Закарпаття; цифрова освіта; очна освіта