

Perspectives and Challenges of Online Language Learning: Slovak University Students' Viewpoints

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Abstract—Within the span of the past two years, modern technologies have induced major changes in education. It is primarily the Covid-19 pandemic that has altered the way of foreign language instruction. Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of Slovak university EFL learners towards online English language learning. Altogether 188 participants completed a survey, indicating their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The research results indicate that the students either agree or are neutral to the majority of statements involving their conditions for online learning and developing particular language skills and systems. However, it should be also emphasized that some challenges of online learning, such as visiting social networking sites or chatting with peers for non-academic purposes, were also detected to some degree. It is necessary to conduct further studies in this area so that the teaching and learning process is facilitated and ultimately becomes more effective.

Keywords—Covid-19 and EFL learning, online learning, mobile technologies, Slovak university EFL learners, perceptions and attitudes

1 Introduction

Innovations and advancement in modern technologies have triggered changes in every sphere of human activity, including education [1], [2], [3] since new technologies, which account for an inseparable part of our lives, are developing at a rapid pace [4]. It is also the coronavirus disease which has facilitated the utilization of technologies for the purposes of online language learning. Teaching and learning which was normally carried out face-to-face has turned into virtual meetings, using various online applications [5]. This way of teaching offers numerous advantages, but also provides several challenges which need to be discussed due to the fact that these sudden changes require both instructors and students to be prepared and ready for using modern technologies [6]. Therefore, this paper attempts to address these issues by examining the perceptions and attitudes of Slovak university EFL learners towards online language learning.

1.1 Literature review

A number of papers explored the concept of online learning, delivering inconsistent results. Imsa-ard [7] explored Thai university students' perceptions of the sudden change to online learning. The research results suggest that most of the participants preferred face-to-face classrooms to online learning, and that the majority of them are not willing to learn online in the future. However, most of them also believed that their teachers were helpful as regards providing them with assistance and useful feedback during the period of "forced" online learning. Krishnapatria [8] investigated the perceptions of EFL university students towards e-learning in Indonesia. It was only 56% of respondents who claimed to have good perceptions of taking courses amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The remaining 44% seemed to have been affected by their knowledge and experience as regards e-learning. Another study conducted by Nur Agun, Surtikanti and Quiones [9] identified three major obstacles concerning online learning in English Language Education Study Program at Pamane Talino College of Education, namely availability and sustainability of Internet connection, accessibility to teaching media, and compatibility of tools to access media. The authors suggest that more friendly platforms are required to increase the students' participation.

Almusharraf and Khahro [10] aimed at evaluating the postsecondary student satisfaction with online learning platforms and learning experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia. The study indicates that the research participants are generally satisfied with the university staff who agreed on the use of specific online platforms, grading system, assessment options, training workshop, technical support, etc. However, it seems that universities ought to rethink the assessment types and weights so as to carefully and appropriately measure students' learning, which is also supported by [11]. Finally, a series of professional workshops and practical training courses are necessary for the continuation of online teaching and learning success [12]. Another study [13] suggests that the majority of language students are interested in online learning, which is considered to be fun and flexible. However, they also regard online learning as not fully successful. The participants considered the skill of listening as the most challenging to learn in the context of online learning.

According to [14], the online learning of a foreign language can be perceived as active and enjoyable learning of foreign languages through the means of blended systems that can be used in adaptive ways in potentially challenging situations to promote the language proficiency. The authors further claim that technologies have to be accessible and usable in order to reduce stress related to learning online. It is also noted that employing the breakout rooms will possibly support the needs for social interaction and facilitate the relaxed atmosphere of foreign language learning. On the other hand, Ritonga et al. [15] maintain that perceptions of students learning online Arabic as a foreign language are quite low and thus online learning is not recommended as majority of students and teachers still prefer face-to-face learning.

Based on the literature review and a relatively new phenomenon switching to online learning due to the Covid-19 disease, the research results appear to be inconsistent and additional exploration in this area is necessary. Further, research in Slovakia on this

matter is still in its infancy. Thus, this paper attempts to cast more light on this phenomenon by conducting research on online learning in relation to its perceptions by Slovak university EFL students.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research background

The primary objective of this paper was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of Slovak EFL students towards online learning. A questionnaire was distributed to participants, who were asked to provide information on their perceptions and attitudes towards online language learning by choosing one of the five options within three sets of statements: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree; a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed. For the purposes of this research, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are university EFL students' perceptions as regards the conditions of online learning?
2. What are university EFL students' perceptions as regards online English language learning?

2.2 Research sample

The research participants were formed by the B.A. and M.A. university EFL students (convenience sampling) from two universities in Slovakia. Altogether 188 students (43 males and 145 females) took part in this research. On average, they were 20.5 years of age. Most of them had been studying English for approximately 12 years the time of experiment.

2.3 Instruments and procedure

The questionnaire method, which is one of the most common [16] and popular [17] data collections methods, frequently measuring attitudes and perceptions by means of responses was employed in order to collect the data as regards the participants' perceptions of online learning. The questionnaire was developed by the authors. On the basis of the feedback and suggestions of the authors' colleagues, the questionnaire was revised. The quantitative data were obtained through a Likert scale (a set of statements where participants are asked to show their level of agreement [18]) of 1 to 5, where 1 corresponds to a strong disagreement and 5 corresponds to a strong agreement.

The interpretation of respondents' answers proceeded from the study performed by Sarigöz [19, p. 213].

$$RO = \frac{HV - LV}{NO} = \frac{5 - 1}{5} = 0.80$$

RO: range of options

HV: highest value

LF: lowest value

NO: number of options

The scores will be interpreted as follows for the purposes of this study:

Table 1. Mean score interpretation

Mean score	Score interpretation	Level of agreement
1.00 – 1.80	Strongly disagree	Very low
1.81 – 2.60	Disagree	Low
2.61 – 3.40	Undecided	Neutral
3.41 – 4.20	Agree	High
4.21 – 5.00	Strongly agree	Very high

2.4 Results and discussion

The first set of statements concentrated on conditions for online learning. The perceptions of participants are displayed in Table 2. Overall, they expressed agreement to all five statements as the values ranged from 3.73 to 4.11. It can be, therefore, concluded that their technical equipment, Internet connection and signal stability is sufficient, and that they have a quiet space for online learning.

Table 2. Conditions for online learning

Item no.	Statement	Mean	SD
1	My technical equipment (notebook, smartphone, earphones, camera, etc.) is sufficient for the purposes of attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform.	4,11	0,82
2	My Internet connection speed at home is sufficient for the purposes of taking online classes through the MS Teams platform.	3,86	0,82
3	I have a quiet space/room for the purposes of attending/taking online courses so that I am not disturbed when taking online English classes.	3,81	1,11
4	The quality of sound and picture is good during my online MS Teams English classes.	3,74	0,79
5	I have a stable Internet connection and a good signal quality at home.	3,73	0,88

The second set of statements concentrated on developing language skills and systems during online learning. The data, ranked in descending order, can be found in Table 3. Students agree that they are able to develop their listening skills, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Other aspects of language, (speaking, reading, and writing skills) fall within the 'neutral' range of agreement, although it should be noted that the values approach the 'high' level of agreement level. As far as the breakout rooms in MS Teams are concerned, the value 3.38 is very close to the 'high agreement' category (3.41), which means that they more or less agree that breakout rooms represent an interesting and exiting way of online English learning. However, their level of agreement is neutral to the statement "We also use the breakout rooms (breakout rooms allow learners to

work in pairs or groups) in MS Teams during the online English classes”, which can be regarded as an interesting piece of finding since the breakout rooms and their use represent one of the key principles of Communicative language teaching and learning, allowing learners to practice language in relatively safe environments in pair or small groups. On the basis of this piece of finding, teachers could implement more work using the breakout rooms. Students’ level of agreement is also neutral as regards the statement “My overall command in English has NOT improved (very) much for the past year because of attending/taking the English classes online”, which means that online learning did not seem to affect significantly their improvement in the target language.

Table 3. English language learning

Item no.	Statement	Mean	SD
1	Attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform enables me to develop my listening skills.	3,77	0,93
2	Attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform enables me to develop my vocabulary.	3,66	0,93
3	Attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform enables me to develop my pronunciation.	3,46	1,06
4	Attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform enables me to develop my grammar.	3,45	1,01
5	Attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform enables me to develop my speaking skills.	3,38	1,13
6	Breakout rooms represent an interesting and exciting way of online English learning.	3,37	0,91
7	Attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform enables me to develop my reading skills.	3,26	1
8	Attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform enables me to develop my writing skills.	3,12	1
9	We also use the breakout rooms (breakout rooms allow learners to work in pairs or groups) in MS Teams during the online English classes.	3,08	1,29
10	My overall command in English has NOT improved (very) much for the past year because of attending/taking the English classes online.	2,72	1,08

Table 4 contains the obtained data, ranked in descending order, in terms of general perception concerning online English language learning. The first seven statements fall within the ‘high’ level of agreement. The participants use online/electronic dictionaries for checking various aspects of vocabulary. They further agree that online learning through the MS Teams platform is convenient and effective, providing them with valuable learning experience, and making them more autonomous learners. They also use the chat option in MS Teams to communicate with the teacher or their peers for language learning purposes, and they are provided with sufficient feedback on their work.

The rest of the statements fall within the ‘neutral’ level of agreement category, although the values vary. Interestingly, they agree that it is easier to successfully pass the tests when administered through the MS Teams platform. This statement achieved the mean of 3.3, which is rather close to the minimum ‘high level of agreement’ level (3.41). This definitely merits attention of instructors and researchers as this may be an

indication of speculative and unacademic behavior, or the tests do not seem to be appropriately created and administered, and both validity and reliability may be questionable.

A relatively high value regarding the neutral range was also detected within the statement “I prefer attending/taking online courses to attending/taking classes in person at the university”, which is in opposition to the study conducted by [15]. In a similar way, a high value in terms of neutral range of agreement was also detected with statement “Attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform is challenging”. This also poses questions whether the teachers and learners are ready for this way of language learning.

Interestingly, it is suggested some of the participants use their smartphones during online learning also for non-learning purposes, they sometimes chat with their friends (for non-academic purposes), and they sometimes visit social networking sites during online learning. This definitely poses an issue in online foreign language learning, and we agree with [20], who maintains that “When learners are distracted, modern technologies hinder rather than facilitate the learning process” (p. 6).

Finally, students’ level of agreement is neutral to the remaining four statements, which means that to some degree, the lack of social contact may pose a problem for them, and that they sometimes feel stressed when attending online classes. The same can be said about using language learning applications during online classes. As far as the effectivity of online classes is concerned in relation to face-to-face classes, the learners’ perception also remains neutral.

Table 4. General perception of online English learning

Item no.	Statement	Mean	SD
1	During the online classes, I (sometimes) use online/electronic/app dictionaries for checking out the meaning, pronunciation, collocation, grammar, etc. of (unknown) words I encounter during the lesson.	3,94	0,81
2	Attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform is convenient (convenient = useful, easy or quick to do; not causing problems).	3,91	0,85
3	Attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform provides me with valuable learning experience.	3,67	0,86
4	During the online classes, I also use the chat in MS Teams platform to communicate with my teacher or other students for learning purposes.	3,66	1,02
5	Attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform is effective (effective = successful and working in the way that was intended).	3,62	0,87
6	I am provided with sufficient feedback on various activities when attending/taking online English classes through the MS Teams platform.	3,62	0,9
7	Attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform makes me a more autonomous and less teacher-dependent learner.	3,51	0,92
8	It is easier to successfully pass my tests when they are administered through an online platform (e.g. MS Forms) than to successfully pass the tests written in person at the university.	3,3	1,01

9	I prefer attending/taking online courses to attending/taking classes in person at the university.	3,25	1,32
10	Attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform is challenging (challenging = difficult in an interesting or enjoyable way).	3,22	0,94
11	During the online classes, I (sometimes) use my smartphone for non-learning purposes.	3,2	1,11
12	During the online classes, I (sometimes) chat with my friends through the Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, etc. for non-learning purposes.	3,14	1,16
13	During the online classes, I (sometimes) visit/browse the social networking websites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, etc.) for non-learning purposes.	2,99	1,16
14	The absence of social contact during online classes poses a problem for me.	2,96	1,31
15	Attending/taking online English language classes through the MS Teams platform is as effective as attending/taking English lessons in person at the university.	2,89	1,24
16	During the online classes, I (sometimes) use English language learning apps (applications) installed on my smartphone for language learning purposes.	2,76	1,21
17	I am sometimes stressed when attending/taking the English courses online through the MS Teams platform because learning takes place online.	2,76	1,27

Participants' conditions for online language learning seem to be sufficient, which suggests that from the onset of coronavirus disease, learners' conditions for online learning at their homes have significantly improved. Students agree that they develop their listening skills and the systems of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar (respectively). The remaining language skills (speaking, reading, writing) fall within the 'neutral' level of agreement. Based on the premise that all the language skills and systems are important, both teachers and learners ought to make sure that each language skill and system is developed by means of online learning.

However, it should be emphasized that instructors should implement the so-called breakout rooms to a higher degree as this feature of MS Teams allows language learners to actively practice items of L2 in relatively safe environments, decreasing their inhibition. This phenomenon requires further investigation, and it appears that increasing awareness of this feature would prove useful, both to practicing teachers and teacher trainees.

Finally, attention also needs to be directed to an unacademic use of modern technologies during online learning. Visiting social networking sites, using smartphones for non-academic purposes, or chatting with their peers (for non-learning purposes) represent pitfalls of technological devices and gadgets that seem to hinder the teaching and learning process. Further, research on these challenges appears to be in its infancy; therefore, researchers and teachers ought to conduct more exploration in this field.

This study is not comprehensive and as every study, it has its limitations. Employing larger population of students as well as applying a greater number of statements would definitely prove useful in future studies. Other types of research instruments, such as observation or interviews, could also be used. Thus, this study can be also considered as a pilot study, on the basis of which further studies could be conducted.

It seems that learners have become somewhat more familiar with online learning (in comparison to times when the coronavirus pandemic came into being), but much remains to be examined and discovered so that the process of teaching and learning languages is effective, also when online learning platforms are implemented into the process.

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