

EFL University Students Challenges in the Process of Online Learning of Foreign Languages in Ukraine

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Abstract

The sudden shift of English language teaching from face-to-face classroom interaction to online learning has resulted in many challenges for EFL students in Ukraine. The aim of the study is to analyze the challenges EFL students at Ukrainian higher educational institutions face under the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine measures. Mastering a foreign language requires the development of foreign language skills, motivation, self-esteem, emotional stability, and psychological involvement of students in the learning process. There was the survey for English language learners at Ukrainian Universities: Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Kyiv National Linguistic University, Taras Shevchenko Chernihiv National University "Chernihiv Collegium." The study analyzes the responses of 357 students. The researchers surveyed in 2020. The results of the study show that students have psychological challenges in the process of learning foreign languages. They are caused by low self-esteem, demotivation, frustration, fear of failure, the impact of quarantine measures and conditions: lack of face-to-face interaction, pandemic-related stress, anxiety, depression, etc. The author uses the methods of theoretical analysis, synthesis, comparison, classification, and systematization of theoretical and experimental data. The results of this study provide recommendations for EFL teachers to enhance the efficiency of online teaching and learning activities. The study presents some recommendations for EFL teachers to guide their students through online learning.

Keywords: challenges, the Covid-19, foreign languages, online learning, pandemic, students, Ukrainian Universities

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Introduction

Rapid transition from in-person to remote modes of learning in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic has brought new challenges for Ukrainian students at higher educational institutions. Teachers and students have gone home and self-quarantined at the same time (UNESCO, 2020). The teachers gave all the lectures and seminars online at Ukrainian Universities. Thus, psychological barriers have become urgent for both students and educators. Ukrainian Universities currently face the task of finding adequate responses to the challenges both students and educators have faced. In our opinion, under such conditions, one of such responses is the development of approaches and strategies to foreign language learning, which should become one of the system-forming elements of modern higher education.

The language of international communication, innovation, and technology is known to be English. Unlike many developed countries, Ukraine is outside the English-speaking world, and the general level of foreign language proficiency of our population is not so high. As our teaching experience shows, the situation is getting worse due to the long-term practice of foreign language teaching based on the grammar-translation approach and the relatively weak rootedness of modern communicative models in Ukrainian educational practice. So, it is essential to define the communication and language barriers of EFL students, as well as to suggest ways of overcoming them.

Over the last decade, the problem of overcoming challenges in foreign language learning has gained much attention (Karim, 2020; Massanov, 2010; Rasheed et al., 2020; Sopilko, 2008a; Tamm, 2020; Verbitskaya, 2003; Zimnyaya, 2001). However, it is hard to solve this problem because of a rapid transition to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, EFL students face challenges or barriers in learning.

The term "barrier" means an obstacle or difficulty (including in the communication process). The term "language barrier" means an individual, subjective inability to use the inside knowledge, when a person has difficulties expressing his ideas, thoughts with the help of a foreign language in the presence of relevant expertise (Verbitskaya, 2003).

Motivation, self-esteem, psychological and emotional state can affect students' performance. The first psychological component of the challenge is an inability or difficulty of understanding and spontaneous responding to the language of an interlocutor, even with a necessary amount of language means (Massanov, 2010).

The second component is high emotional tension, which is a cause of language difficulties. Language difficulties influence the choice of words, and style of speech, namely the grammatical informality of utterances. Students' speech becomes stereotyped; vocabulary is monotonous, the logical connection is unclear, the sequence between individual statements is incorrect. The ambiguity of the transmitted message leads to misunderstanding between the subjects of communication (Sopilko, 2008a).

The third component is fear. For example, an EFL student can make mistakes because he is afraid of failure. He cannot achieve the goal of communication, and solve tasks (Karpenko, 2008).

The fourth component is the lack of motivation to speak in a foreign language (Bokshan, 2010). External and internal basis play a significant role in foreign language learning (Zyazyun, 1989). Motivated students want to pass a foreign language test (exam), and in the future, they need employment. To succeed, they should use of a foreign language in their professional activity.

Internal motivation is associated with forming unique values of a personality, arising under the influence of social values (Yakovleva, 2003). Such individual values raise social status and self-esteem, new opportunities for professional growth, general development, meaningful communication, cultural leisure, and others.

Literature Review

Literature Review helped us to define the psychological characteristics of a student, and analyze the possibility of successful advance in education at different stages of maturity (Karim, 2020; Massanov, 2010; Sopilko, 2008a; Iakovleva, 2003; Naqvi et al. 2020; Tajiev, 2020). Studies reflect peculiarities of foreign language teaching to students (Rasheed et al. 2020; Sopilko, 2008b; etc. The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on higher education and students, the challenges it has brought became a subject of great interest for modern scholars (Zaytseva et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020 et al.).

Psychological challenges are not among well-studied problems. The term “the socio-psychological challenge” has been defined (Shevtsova, 2020). The communication challenges were studied (Grynyuk et al., 2020; Rean, 2017, etc.). Various classifications of challenges were suggested (Bokshan 2010; Leontyev, 2005; etc.). However, in psychology, there is no clear definition of the barrier, the nature of its occurrence is ambiguous, there are only some fragmentary studies of psychological barriers.

There three main groups of psychological challenges that EFL students face: cognitive, emotional, and communication challenges (Zaytseva et al., 2020).

Summing up the outlined scientific works, it is necessary to mention that students improve their skills if their teacher manages to anticipate, and diagnose possible learning challenges.

The main factors in determining the grounds for the allocation of psychological barriers in students' educational activities are:

- objective characteristics (special conditions) of educational activities that contributing to obstacles and difficulties emergence;
- subjective factors of experiencing mental states of tension caused by various internal causes (self-dissatisfaction, internal anxiety, anxiety, etc.);
- meaningful and dynamic characteristics of psychological barriers, which are manifested in various types of mental activity to understand the difficulty, assess their traumatic impact on personality and learning activities, and, depending on this, affect emotional experience depth of a critical situation.

The research shows that it is essential for EFL students to develop foreign language skills, communicative flexibility, training of cognitive processes, emotional stability, and psychological engagement in the learning process.

Methods

Theoretical analysis, synthesis, and comparison for the conceptualization of philological, psychological and pedagogical scientific literature, classification, and systematization of theoretical and experimental data concerning the concept of barrier, its components, and features were used.

The author chose the Method of Generalization for the interpretation of theoretical sources on the researchers' work, the results of students' performance, making conclusions.

The author did a systematic review of the collected literature.

The Survey method was used to determine the challenges that Ukrainian EFL students face.

Participants

To define the challenges that Ukrainian students face in foreign language learning, the survey was suggested for the first- and third-year students. The students were supposed to fill in the questionnaires. They contained questions concerning distance learning. The participants for this survey were from 17 to 20 years old. It can be as Zimnyaya (2001) et al. (2001) have stated this period in life to be one of the most in personal development. The data and samples were prepared for Ukrainian universities: Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics (KNUTE), Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University (GrKNU), (Kyiv National Linguistic University (KNLU), Taras Shevchenko Chernihiv National University "Chernihiv Collegium" (ChNU "CC") through a questionnaire, and classroom observation during the academic year of 2020. A total of 357 students provided complete information regarding the survey (Table one).

Table 1. *Characteristics of the participants*

Characteristics	Percentage (%)
<i>Age of students</i>	
18 years and below	53.4
19 years and Above	46.6
<i>Sex</i>	
Female	234
Male	123
<i>Residential area</i>	
Rural	67
Urban	33

Instruments

We offered the respondents to fill in an online questionnaire. In the present paper, results from an online survey were described. The online questionnaire, consisted of closed-ended questions, which included a predefined list of answer options. Besides, in the questionnaire, there were open-ended questions. The respondents were asked to provide an answer in their own words. The author included multiple choice questions concerning the students' attitude to distance learning, online educational platforms, their emotional state, difficulties, etc., in the questionnaire. They allowed

the students to choose one or more options from a list of answers. If none of the multiple answer options apply to the respondents, they might select a random solution, which could impact the accuracy of their results. The respondents were free to answer the questions using desktop computers, smartphones, laptops, tablets/iPads, etc. The author analyzed the results.

Procedures

The study defined the challenges that EFL students in Ukraine face due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The EFL students were able to identify different challenges they were facing during online foreign language learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The researchers offered the respondents to indicate the strategies and approaches to overcome the challenges. A structural questionnaire link using 'Google form' was sent to students' through Viber and WhatsApp. The results have implications for educators, syllabus designers, classroom practice.

Results

The survey results show that the majority of students (76%) were unprepared for remote learning. Online education started rapidly under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic and precautionary quarantine. Twenty-four percent of students said they were prepared for the change as they took an online course before. During online learning, Ukrainian students used various educational online platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Viber, Google meets/hangout, Google classroom, Moodle, WhatsApp, etc. The participants of the survey pointed out that they were unfamiliar with online learning platforms. However, sixty-one percent of survey respondents lacked self-discipline to study. Students consider that one of the main reasons for the challenges, or barriers during online foreign language classes, is a person's psychological insecurity and lack of self-confidence. It leads to fear of making a mistake, discomfort, lack of motivation, distractions and time management, uncertainty about the future.

The fear of making a mistake can arise due to incorrect learning or an inappropriate English language learning environment. Most often, this is the teacher's fault. Perhaps, the teachers constantly corrected the student's errors, not allowing him to express his point of view, which is wrong. To fix the mistakes, the researchers should take into account the psychological characteristics of each student. Accordingly, a teacher should rectify the errors in speaking, and after a student finishes his statement.

According to the survey results, the transition to online learning has changed the students' lives significantly: there is an adaptation to the loads and forms of work, lifestyle, etc. Sixty-two percent of the survey participants reported that they had technical problems. It decreased the motivation of the students to study. The majority of survey participants, especially first-year students, faced difficulties adapting to the learning process online. These difficulties include a lot of independent work, a lack of skills in self-study work, a lack of digital opportunities. Many students faced such challenges as depression, anxiety, a lack of interest and attention, delayed feedback, a lack of personal contact, verbal communication, poor Internet connection, an unfavorable study environment at home, etc.

Table 2. *The survey results*

Seventy-six percent of students	had difficulties adapting to the learning process online.
Twenty-four percent of students	were prepared for the change as they took an online course before.
Sixty-one percent of students	had difficulties in maintaining the self-discipline needed to study in a remote mode.
Sixty-two percent of the respondents	had technical problems.

Discussion

The analysis of the scientific literature, and the results of the survey allowed the researchers to assume that students have many difficulties in foreign language learning under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic and rapid transition to a remote mode of education (Karim, 2020; Massanov, 2010, Sopilko, 2008a; Iakovleva, 2003, Naqvi et al., 2020, Tajiev, 2020). In our opinion, not all students prefer online learning. Due to distance learning, students are supposed to be more concentrated. They should be better time managers, and need to work independently. Many distance learners are different from traditional undergraduates in that they are already in professions. Switching from conventional classroom face-to-face training to computer-based one in a virtual classroom, using educational platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Moodle, Google Class, etc., brought students new challenges. Comparing well-planned distance learning with a rapid transition to online education in response to a crisis caused by the pandemic Covid-19, the researchers concluded that these forms of organizing the learning process are entirely different. We have decided to highlight the specific challenges the students are facing nowadays.

Ukrainian students think that online learning does not have the same value as classroom training. Most students admit that blended learning is more acceptable for them than a remote one. The main difficulties that Ukrainian students have are such as the lack of digital opportunities, a lot of independent work, a lack of personal contact and communication. Students suffer from depression, anxiety, a lack of interest and attention. Many students have poor Internet connection, and an unfavorable study environment at home, etc. The lack of actual, so-called face-to-face communication with lecturers and fellow students has become a real challenge for students: they could not understand the mood of their groupmates and educators, they didn't always get the feedback on time. All mentioned above convinces us that for students, it is hard to adapt to the online learning environment, which leads to different distractions and time management problems. In contrast, it takes time for them to get used to the methods of computer-based education.

Due to the survey results, the researchers suggest successful strategies to overcome the challenges listed above. They are the following:

- explaining students' benefits of online learning and prepare them for online classes;
- high level of motivation to master a foreign language;
- taking into account individual psychological characteristics of students by a lecturer;
- high appreciation of other students' achievements in the process of learning foreign languages, which helps to increase self-esteem;

- engagement of students in foreign language activities, which brings a sense of satisfaction from educational activities.
- mutual faith of an educator and students in achieving success, as well as a favorable psychological climate in foreign language classes;
- it is necessary to create such conditions in English classes, in which students would feel comfortable. If the students and teachers follow such requirements and a person-centered approach, they will solve the problems;
- it is necessary to develop training programs for students to help them adapt to the online environment.

Conclusion

To overcome the challenges, students face in the process of online foreign language learning, it is necessary to use special teaching methods, and approaches. The most effective way to overcome the challenges, is a communicative approach to learning English and the emphasis on the personal characteristics of EFL students. It is significant to practice all language skills and speaking skills, create situations close to reality, affect the emotional world of students, and encourage students to communicate.

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