Positive experience and further prospects for online education

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Abstract: The article focuses on the positive aspects of online education and discusses the lessons learned and effective practices that can be brought back into conventional face-to-face classes. Unlike numerous studies pointing out disadvantages of distance education, the authors contend that online education during the pandemic was quite efficient, enabling them to take away a lot of useful findings, techniques, and experiences. The paper describes the results of the study conducted among freshmen and sophomores, as well as lecturers of the Department of the English language and the administration of Baikal International Business School of Irkutsk State University. Using student and teacher questionnaires, a dean interview, and observation, the authors collect multiple psychographic, motivational, and behavioral data allowing to find out preferences and opinions of online education. As a result of their research, the authors come to the conclusion that the main outcomes of online teaching are more collaboration for course development and preparation of student assessment, the integration of MOOCS into conventional courses, the use of numerous interactive technologies and videoconferencing platforms for various purposes, more reflection on teaching and student learning, and more opportunities for professional growth. Overall, teachers report becoming more knowledgeable, better equipped, and more competent. Besides professional benefits, after overcoming the challenges of online teaching, the instructors seem to have become more stress-resistant and resourceful.
Key words: online teaching; distance learning; effective teaching practices; benefits of distance education

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Положительный опыт и дальнейшие перспективы онлайн-образования

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Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются положительные аспекты онлайн-обучения и обсуждаются полученные уроки и успешный опыт, которые могут быть применены на традиционных очных занятиях. В отличие от многочисленных исследований, указывающих на недостатки дистанционного обучения, авторы полагают, что онлайн-обучение во время пандемии было достаточно эффективно и позволило привнести в традиционный формат много полезных находок, методик и опыта. Статья основывается на результатах исследования, проведенного среди первокурсников и второкурсников, а также преподавателей кафедры английского языка и администрации Байкальской международной бизнес-школы ИГУ. С помощью анкетирования студентов и преподавателей, интервью с деканом факультета и метода наблюдения авторы собрали многочисленные психографические, мотивационные

и поведенческие данные, позволившие выяснить преференции и мнения об онлайн-обучении. В результате проведенного исследования авторы приходят к выводу, что основными уроками, которые они извлекли, являются понимание преимущества более тесного взаимодействия при разработке курсов и подготовке тестирования студентов, частичное внедрение массовых открытых онлайн-курсов в свои дисциплины, использование интерактивных методик и онлайн платформ для видеоконференций, рефлексия результатов обучения студентов, а также больше возможностей для профессионального роста. В целом преподаватели отмечают, что стали более осведомленными, подготовленными и более компетентными. Кроме профессиональных преимуществ после преодоления трудностей онлайн-обучения преподаватели кафедры указывают большую стрессоустойчивость и изобретательность в подготовке занятий.

Ключевые слова: дистанционное обучение; преподавание английского языка; преимущества дистанционного обучения; успешный опыт преподавания.

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Introduction

The past two years have been a challenge for many teachers of all levels of education as first, they had to adjust to online learning environments, and now after returning to classrooms there is another issue: how to incorporate best online teaching experiences into traditional offline teaching.

In fact, for high school organizational processes, there is no doubt that online education has become its important constituent part; the reality itself dictates the rules, which we, educators, can hardly ignore. No matter how strong our negative or positive reaction toward distance education may be [Kostoeva, Lolokhoeva, Kostoeva Z.M. 2020; Yaroslavtseva, Tsarenkova 2020; Schneyder, Ovchinnikova 2021], we have to face the problems in the new educational reality and make the newly acquired online class strategies more effective to use them now, in the off-line or hybrid format of education.

Actually, the present paper attempts not only to study the results of a two-year study of how the students' attitudes and perception of online learning changed and what lessons were learned, but also to reconsider some benefits and the efficacy of using acquired experience in this new highly technological paradigm of higher education. Moreover, the study discusses not so much the limitations of distance education, but rather new-opened possibilities and even advantages: modular teaching learning process, development of cultural awareness through using online authentic resources, intensive audio-visual teaching, and active student involvement into educational process.

Literature Review

The pandemic situation gave food for a lot of discussions about the effectiveness of online education. For higher educational institutions, the idea of this type of education was not absolutely innovative as many universities in Russia and all over the world have been incorporating e-learning into the educational process since 1990s. In the 1960s, distance education gained international recognition, and under the auspices of UNESCO [Petkova 2015], it began its consistent and successful development. From the very start, researchers were ambivalent about the effectiveness of distance learning. Even the situation with COVID-19, mass transition to distance learning, as a result, and gained experience did not form a unanimous opinion on this issue. Most of the researchers [Schneyder, Ovchinnikova 2021; Kolyada et al. 2021] accept distance learning now as a necessity because a lot of educational problems cannot be solved without the Internet; however, some of the authors are still focusing more on the disadvantages of e-learning than on the advantages and accomplishments.

Specifically, it is stated that being involved into e-learning studies, the students faced several groups of problems: organizational, technical, educational and methodological, and socio-psychological [Rakachev 2020]. The last group of difficulties can be considered as the main one, requiring special and more long-term adaptation.

The socio-psychological issues have been under discussion among many other researchers especially the aspect of student psychology: the absence of the physical presence of a teacher, limitation of student-student interaction, long lasting lock down, and isolation – all caused difficulties for a lot of students and even a real long-lasting emotional discomfort. Consequently, some researchers started to show a great concern about negative influence of online learning on students' mental health, and as a result, they concluded that in most cases emotional disorder affected students' academic progress. In some foreign countries, the students mostly suffered from stress, anxiety, and even depression [Aslan et al. 2020; Odriozola-González et al. 2020; Saravanan et al. 2020; Son et al. 2020].

Russian students, according to the opinion of some researchers, experienced the loss of interest, some lack of attention, dissatisfaction with the results, and sometimes even anxiety [Bekoeva, Kokaeva, Osipova, Hubesti 2021; Bazaeva, Andreeva 2020]. However, as it is stated in one of the articles dedicated to the problem of students' emotional effects of online learning, the investigations on "broader perspective on the emotional state of the students, including a wider range of emotions and considering positive emotions such as calm or trust, is still missing". Therefore, this aspect requires more studies, data, and deeper critical understanding.

Discussing faculty challenges, many researchers described them as "unique educational crisis in teaching" [Hietanen & Svedholm-Häkkinen 2022] mostly because of the lack of formal training, little practical experience, and low level of motivation and desire to teach online [Lederman 2019]. Others, who share the opinion that the online learning has more disadvantages, first of all, point to the low quality of online coursework and emphasize that very often the facilitators are not properly trained in online delivery and use the same methodologies as they are in the habit of applying off-line. As a result, the online program becomes less effective than the one delivered offline [Aristovnik et al. 2020; Alnusairat et al. 2020].

Importantly, these characteristics are not necessarily true for all, which the research literature emphasizes, but at the same time we can hardly disagree that faculty were not highly trained and motivated for online format before they were made to use it. How to make faculty become more motivated and better trained after coming back to offline format is the main task of higher education now and should not be postponed till the next crisis. To achieve positive results, first of all, we need more research, and ours might contribute to a better understanding of online education.

Methods of research

For more objectivity, it was necessary to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the students, teachers, and the university administration. Quantitative data was obtained with the help of surveys, while the interview provided us with qualitative information.

Since an educational process is bilateral, it was important to get not only student opinions but also those of teachers. The student survey allowed us to embrace five groups of freshmen and sophomores. It contained 20 questions of different types asking if students enjoyed online learning, what they liked in particular, how effective it was, if it was difficult, and so on. Also there were questions about the technology they used, some psychological aspects (time-management, stress, concentration, etc.), and pedagogical tools and resources. The survey consisted of 16 questions focusing primarily on the instructors' evaluation of their online teaching experience and their students' progress and results.

The interview was arranged with the Dean of the Siberian-American School of Management who an-swered questions from the point of view of university administration. Being both the administrator and the teacher, she, like no one else, is familiar with both teachers' and students' needs and issues that they faced during online learning. It was a semi-structured interview with 6 questions. The questions dealt with efficiency of organizing distance learning in our business school, preparation, adaptation, and lessons learned.

To understand how the students adapted to the classroom when they switched back to the traditional format, we used an observation method. The parameters we paid attention to were motivation, satisfaction with the transition, and possible challenges associated with it.

Results of the research

When asked in January 2021, whether they enjoyed learning remotely, over 70 % of the students answered positively and found online learning rather effective, while 27 % pointed out a lot of challenges and disadvantages. Most of all they liked a comfortable home environment (62 %) and easy access to different online resources (47 %). About 7 % of the respondents considered virtual learning very difficult, though. One third of the students believed that it was very hard for them to manage time. About 40 % found distance learning rather stressful. Among other challenges, they mentioned having trouble concentrating because of parents and siblings at home, social media, and a homey atmosphere. Some students also added Internet issues and dislike of the platform *Teams*. However, about a third reported being satisfied with everything.

In terms of grades, most students responded that they demonstrated a better performance online than in the classroom, and the possible reasons they enumerated were a comfortable atmosphere, the possibility of cheating, and shyness in class (online it was easier, especially without a camera on). Answering the question "Why were you reluctant to switch on your camera?", the most common explanation was that they did not look good.

As for the most and the least engaging activities, the answers were very controversial. What some students found interesting (interactive online games like *Kahoot*, debates, presentations, pair and group work), the others considered boring and less useful. Nevertheless, the respondents seemed to agree on the most effective online resources: *Edmodo*, *Coursera*, and *Ted Talks*.

Even though the majority liked studying online, less than a half (45 %) would recommend this format. Responding to the question about the changes they would like to make, the students wrote about the schedule (they wanted later classes) and longer breaks. To evaluate the efficiency of online education from the instructors' point of view, it is necessary to summarize the teacher survey results. The pie chart below shows the answers to the first question about stress (Fig. 1).

All the teachers found the transfer from classroom instruction to online stressful; however, it was not equally stressful for everyone. Over a half (43 % + 14 %) experienced a strong stress, while 43 % described it

as slightly stressful. The next question aimed at finding out how the teachers evaluated their remote teaching experience. All those surveyed agreed that it was worse than classroom teaching. For the vast majority, it was somewhat worse, but not entirely.

Figure 2 describes how stressed the students were during online learning in the teachers' eyes.

According to the teachers, almost all the freshmen and sophomores were stressed to some extent, although a small proportion were not. Answering the question about the effectiveness of virtual learning, about 86 percent of instructors who took part in the questionnaire did not consider remote learning as effective as classroom learning. When asked about the challenges faced by students, the respondents mentioned a lack of responsibility, little self-discipline and motivation, and poor time-management. About a third saw problems in teacher-student communication as well. The vast majority agreed that face-to-face communication mattered; however, remote learning failed to substitute it entirely.

The most effective digital approaches that motivated students, according to the teachers, were audio-visual: videos, presentations, and screen-sharing. Concerning effective methods, about three-fourths of respondents pointed out project-based learning as one the most suitable ways for online teaching. Group work was also seen efficient by about a third of those surveyed. As for testing, because of cheating, the oral question-answer format was the most effective.

When asked if they enjoyed teaching remotely, the majority (57 %) answered positively, whereas 43 per cent gave negative responses, meaning that they would like to make some changes. Another question dealt with the school support during online teaching. Here all the respondents considered the school helpful. The same is true of colleagues: the teachers supported each other greatly. Also the survey showed satisfaction with the technology and software used during the pandemic. Regarding work and life balance, it was easy to maintain it for less than a half only; for the rest it was rather challenging.

Among the obstacles, the teachers enumerated overload, student cheating, poor attendance, bad internet connection and limited online platforms. Also some mentioned lack of time, lack of resources and difficulty managing screen time (Fig. 3).

When asked to assess the quality of distance learning arranged by the school, the dean reported that our school was very effective. We were the first to use *Microsoft Teams*, which enabled us to switch to full-fledged online classes, and other schools in our university took advantage of that experience and later applied it to their contexts. Our business school adapted to online teaching successfully, as we had incorporated distance learning before, providing different online programs and modules. It is noted that the efficiency of distance learning is less effective than the traditional classroom mode: it is impossible to control students online all the time and hard to understand how they

Was it stressful for you to switch to teaching online?
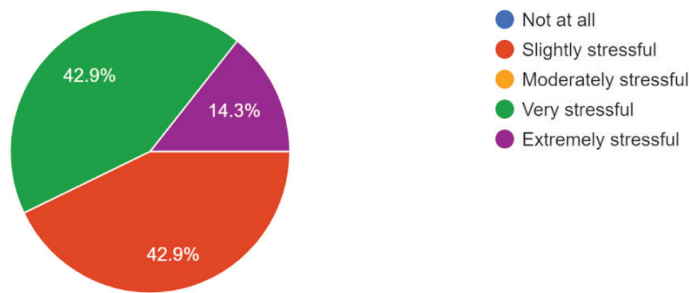7 responses

- Not at all
- Slightly stressful
- Moderately stressful
- Very stressful
- Extremely stressful

Figure 1

How stressed were your students while learning remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic?
7 responses

- Not at all stressed
- Slightly stressed
- Moderately stressed
- Very stressed
- Extremely stressed

Figure 2

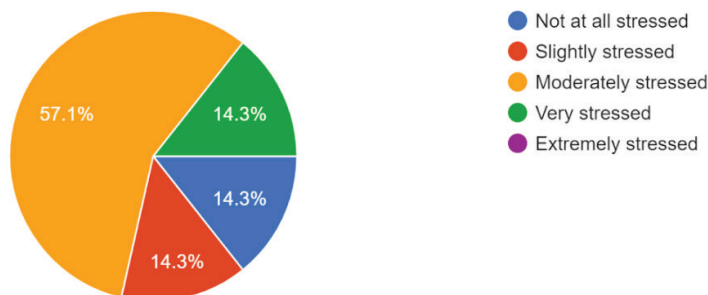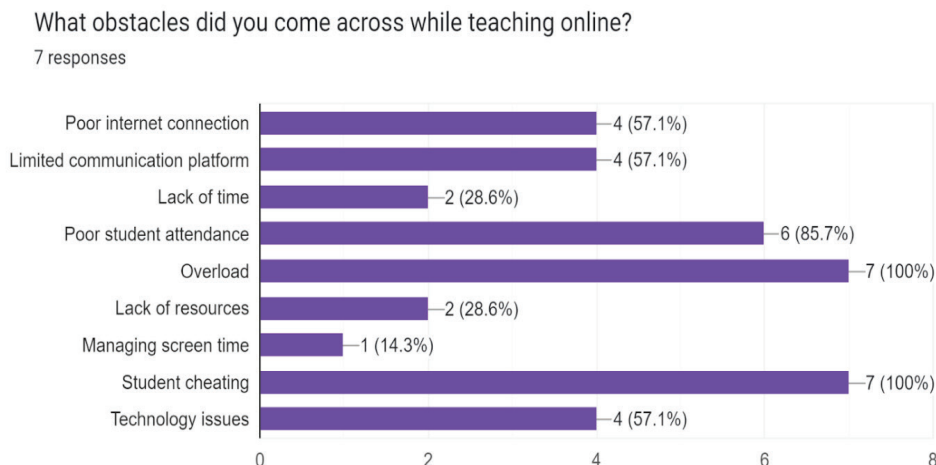What obstacles did you come across while teaching online?

7 responses

Figure 3

mastered the material. The next question sought to find out how satisfied the parents and students were during the virtual learning. While some parents insisted on being entirely online, others demanded sticking to a traditional classroom instruction. In terms of challenges, the interviewee indicated that they primarily concerned the organization of the schedule when there was a mixed online/ classroom mode. It was very difficult to meet sanitation requirements limiting the number of students in the university and arrange "online" and "offline", satisfying the teachers at the same time. Some instructors worked at other places, and it was a challenge to make it convenient for everyone. The last interview question was about students' performance, and here the Dean reported that it decreased. More students were expelled for absenteeism and failure to meet program requirements than before.

The final method used for the research was observing students when they switched from online to a mixed mode which lasted for about a year. Seminars and practical classes for small student groups were offline, while all the lectures were online. Because the teachers who took part in the survey teach mainly English, they were all in the classroom during the mixed mode. They observed how the students felt after returning to the classrooms. The majority of students were happy to see each other, the teachers, and were highly motivated. Nevertheless, there were a few older sophomore students who seemed to have enjoyed being online. They said that the mixed format should be kept because they managed to do more from home, combining work and studies.

Discussion of the problem

The task was set to find out what lessons taken from remote teaching can be incorporated into a traditional mode.

Stress is the indicator that reflects the differences. The teacher questionnaire demonstrated that they were more stressed than students, and also the teachers considered that online learning was stressful for almost all the students. However, less than half of the students reported being stressed. This can be explained by the fact that young people adapt better to new circumstances, and it is easier to be taught than to arrange an educational process effectively. Preparation for online classes required much more time, creativity, and work. Traditional methods were not effective, so all the teachers had to come up with new ideas, offering students fresh techniques to motivate them and keep their attention. It made teachers test new interactive platforms, design elaborate tests and tasks to prevent cheating and maintain learning at the high level they had set before.

To overcome the difficulties of remote teaching, we organized activities involving students in online learning, the students took videos, the teachers spent classes together with foreign professors. For example, teaching negotiations, the students get acquainted with a *Coursera* course taught by business professors from the University of Michigan and Harvard, which expanded language courses.

As for enjoying the online format, the majority of students and teachers answered positively; however, the percentage of students who liked it is higher (70 % vs. 57 %, respectively). Although many students enjoyed studying online, however less than half would recommend this format.

We have been incorporating *Coursera* courses and separate lessons or tasks into our offline courses, we use video conferencing platforms *Teams*, *Zoom* or *Yandextelemost*.

Conclusion

The lessons learned during online education concern optimization of teaching, setting the balance between the quality of teaching and used efforts. Overwork and stress at the beginning of online education made teachers aware of the benefits of collaboration, the importance of integration and application of useful resources. Combining efforts for course development, class and assessment preparation, alongside with the use of MOOCs, different technologies, and videoconferencing platforms made it easier for teachers, enabling them to invest time and effort into professional development.

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