

The Peculiarities of Distance Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract: The paper demonstrates the feasibility of information and communication technologies (ICT) in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning process. The organizational and pedagogical approaches to efficient EFL learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have been outlined. Furthermore, the main perspectives and challenges appearing in an online learning environment have been characterized. The proposed paper aims to consider the possibility of integrating innovative computer technologies into online foreign language learning to foster students' autonomy and boost their language proficiency. The findings suggest that using ICT is beneficial for mastering a foreign language in out-of-class settings. Admittedly, there is no perfect or universal blend that may suit all the EFL learning environments. Therefore, it is claimed that blended programs should be created for each academic course regarding students' wants, needs, and abilities. Furthermore, each higher educational institution needs to have a strategy for designing and implementing a distance EFL learning program that considers instructional, pedagogical, and technological factors.

Keywords: *Information and Communication Technology; EFL teaching and learning; COVID-19 pandemic; online learning environment; language proficiency; instructional, pedagogical, and technological factors.*

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1. Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, much of the world has undergone a tectonic socio-technological change (Networked Learning Editorial Collective et al., 2021, p. 326), considerably affecting people's attitudes towards the role of information and communication technologies in their lives. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic generated interest in constructing scenarios for deploying modern technologies in the educational sphere. The role of the latter in digital learning and delivery has thus become fundamental (Eika, 2021; Gerasymova et al., 2019; Holubnycha & Baibekova, 2020; Lever-Duffy & McDonald, 2017; Nerubasska et al., 2020; Nerubasska & Maksymchuk, 2020; Onishchuk et al., 2020). Seeking to survive in the education market, higher educational establishments started implementing distance learning to meet the demands of those kept in quarantine and not able to attend classes offline. As the drive for standardization and uniformity, along with a desire for competitiveness and productivity has spread to the domain of higher education (Chirciu, p. 2020, p. 123), distance education is partially putting classroom education on the back burner (Kamal et al., 2021). However, in these distance learning initiatives, "the focus, for the most part, has been limited to selecting the "right" technology and transferring courses to the Web" (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004, p. 107). Despite its extensive use over the last two years, distance learning is still regarded as "a fad in the 21st century academic landscape" (Dayag, 2018, p. 20). So far, however, there is no evidence to presume that distance learning will lose its popularity in the long run.

Current policies of the technocratic world are directed towards expanding international relations between countries and integration into the worldwide community. In this respect, proficiency in a foreign language is a key to international relations development, holding international conferences, cross-cultural interaction, and information exchange. These arise the necessity of finding new constructive ideas for optimizing and intensifying EFL teaching and learning processes. The rapid technological advancement has propounded "a better pattern to find the new teaching models" (Gilakjani, 2017, p. 95). In addition, computer-mediated communication is believed to be "important in distance language teaching not only as a learning tool but as a gateway to target language communities" (White, 2017, p. 137).

The elements of language learning underpin language acquisition. The latter describes a process that typically takes place outside a language classroom and without following a core curriculum. In contrast, the former

“is often geared towards attaining learning goals, determined by a curriculum within an institutional or educational frame” (Funk et al., 2017, p. 27). Distance learning can function as an essential method to learn a foreign language fully aligned with the globally present education demands. It unquestionably upholds the idea that the distance learning approach to EFL classrooms allows language learners to develop their cognitive abilities with ICT spaces and practice a foreign language more authentically.

The paper aims to clarify the possibility of integrating innovative computer technologies into online foreign language learning. There are several important areas where this study makes an original contribution. Firstly, it provides a significant opportunity to advance the understanding of the online language learning environment. Secondly, it draws on systematic research into the advantages and disadvantages of ICT use in EFL online classrooms. Thirdly, it tended to focus on language learning strategies used by distance learners of English, fostering students’ autonomy and developing their language skills.

2. Advantages and disadvantages of using ICT in EFL teaching and learning

The past ten years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of EFL teaching and learning. Modern higher educational establishments tend to use digital technologies and turn to online learning courses more than before, economizing time and providing better learning spaces. The latter are “multimodal, multicultural and multilingual, and they serve a number of purposes, from providing factual, reliable information and allowing learners to create individual or collaborative texts, to opening up fictional worlds and making available games for education” (Stickler & Hampel, 2015, p. 63).

Indeed, the teacher’s role in the online learning process has been totally transformed. He/she is no longer regarded as the person who just transmits the knowledge to the students. On the contrary, the teacher instead operates as a facilitator, advisor, manager, co-learner, and expert that orchestrates what they do. Thus, the students can set about learning a foreign language in various ways, sharing their unique personal identity, skills, learning styles, strategies, and techniques. Such a turn challenges the conventional image of the dependent EFL learner in Ukrainian higher educational establishments.

Most significantly, the classroom can be primarily configured as a space for inquiry in which what is central are the learning processes that are possible to unfold (Landau, 2019, p. 54). Traditional educational system avoiding the use of ICT does not meet the needs of modern students’

communities anymore. Undoubtedly, technology provides new ways to communicate and new forms of social organization, that enable new spaces to learning using IT (Carvalho, 2015, pp. 133-134). Language learning is a directional, intentional and conscious (Funk et al., 2017, p. 27) cognitive process directed towards achieving a fixed set of goals. The role of virtual courses in EFL learning is significant since they enhance communication skills (Ahmadi, 2018; Al-Qahtani, 2019; Bilyalova, 2017). Eventually, such an integrated approach to foreign language learning in distance mode is the most efficient and affordable way of teacher-learner(s) interaction to transmit and gain knowledge, developing various language skills and ways of cognition.

The goal of education is a person, not a service with all that it implies (El Guessab et al., 2021, p. 496). ICTs acquaint us with new multifunctional teaching and learning techniques compared to those already known. It is clear from the research literature that distance education regarding EFL learning works (Kamal et al., 2021; Mofareh, 2019; Stickler, & Hampel, 2015; White, 2017). However, what is not yet clear is the benefits it offers to both teachers and students that can lead to more effective and fruitful learning outcomes. In our view, distance learning of EFL proves to be efficient due to several reasons. Figure 1 pinpoints strictly how online EFL learning benefits students in the educational process.

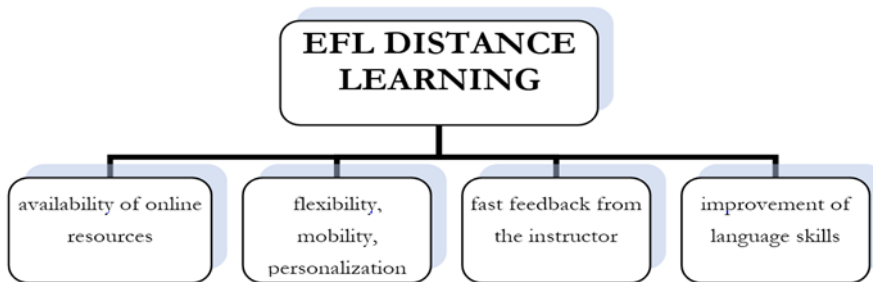


Figure 1. Advantages of distance learning for EFL students
Source: the authors' own conception

The data presented in the Figure demonstrate the results of the authors' thorough scrutiny. Firstly, distance learning in EFL classrooms ensures immediate access to worldwide academic resources, boosting individual and collaborative communication. In this context, the Internet becomes "more than a desktop library and a rapid mail delivery system" (Huang et al., 2019, p. 57). Secondly, it fosters student's mobility, flexibility, and personalization. In other words, it appears to be a perfect example of an

educational system appealing to the personal characteristics of each student, his/her educational needs, and inability to participate in the course activities in his/her academic institution. Thirdly, students can submit their works through email or other operating online platforms and get feedback from the teacher. Fourthly, distance learning presents excellent opportunities for students who wish to improve their writing, reading, and listening skills, forming a profound base for live communication.

Western countries' experience in distance education proves the significance of teacher's presence in the learning process, encouraging active collaboration and generating the feeling of the virtual classroom. By drawing on the concept of distance education, Pozo et al. (2021, p. 11) suggest that teacher training should be promoted to encourage more frequent use of ICTs and change conceptions toward them to promote constructive learning. The figure below illustrates the fundamental merits of distance education for EFL teachers. The authors formulated the conception of the supplied figure.

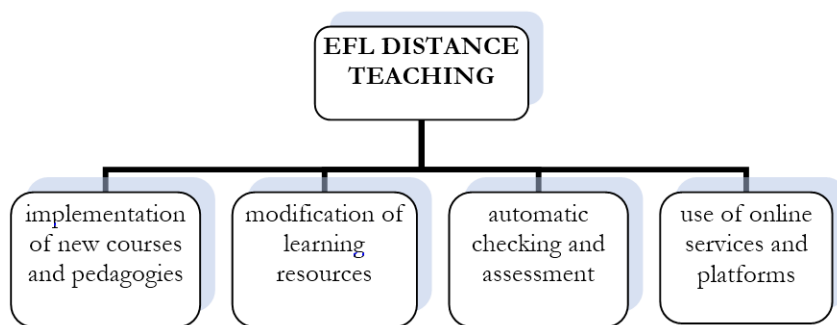


Figure 2. Advantages of distance education for EFL teachers
Source: the authors' own conception

Integrating ICTs into EFL learning is complex and multifaceted, posing many problems for teachers. The preparation for their implementation in the EFL classroom involves in-depth analysis and pre-planning. Firstly, educators can develop new, more efficient ways to operate pedagogical and didactic innovation and correspond to educational goals set before. Because of this, Duffy & Kirkley (2004, p. 109) assume that “knowledge is not contained in the resources, but rather the knowledge is in the goal-oriented use of those resources in a specific context and for a specific purpose”. Landrum (2020, p. 132) noted that one reason to take a class is to learn and take something away from the class. In other words, a well-motivated student may take the most of the resources developed by teachers and fill in the gaps in his/her knowledge.

However, students may have trouble reading digital texts, which create a higher cognitive load (Oku, 2015, pp. 133-134).

Secondly, the learner-content connection is believed to be “one of the most critical interactions in the learning process” (Koszalka et al., 2019, p. 31). In this respect, learning resources should be eligible for online education facilitating meaningful and worthwhile learning. As Li (2020, p. 25) states: “materials are transformed into instruments through their use by teachers and learners in classroom settings”. The scholar claims that teachers, students, and materials are active agents in co-constructing the real classroom teaching and learning (Li, 2020, p. 25). Thus, the teacher is responsible for creating learning materials and resources to meet each student’s needs and modifying them to adjust to lesson objectives and outcomes.

Successful implementation of distance education in the EFL classroom is mainly dependent on the instructor. The latter must be highly qualified and universally trained. On the one hand, he/she should be competent in using pedagogical practices and digital tools. On the other hand, psychological factor plays a profound role in creating a good learning environment. To put it differently, the instructor’s psychological characteristics provide the basis for developing new pedagogies. In this regard, the educator coordinates the class and simulates practical situations, making it possible for each student to realize his/her potential. Furthermore, the EFL teacher working in distance mode is responsible for facilitating communicative processes, controls the students’ compliance with peculiar style and content of oral and written messages, and corrects grammatical, spelling, and other mistakes.

Finally, assessing students’ learning achievements is crucial in any educational setting, especially online. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when given autonomy by the government and university, teachers can make their own assessment decisions and adjustments to meet the needs of new teaching environment (Zhang et al., 2021). Modern online services and platforms offer real-time assessment tools for various language activities, thoroughly analyzing students’ errors and providing opportunities for prescribing further instruction. In the academic view, conducting such online assessments may measure students’ language skills and knowledge and improve their autonomous learning style.

The implementation of online EFL learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic caused many problems for teachers and students. El Guessab et al. (2021, p. 504) list the mandatory presence of the Internet and the potential distance of education, which makes it difficult to control how well the student tested his knowledge, as the apparent disadvantages of

distance learning. In line with this, the major problem is the lack of digital equipment and facilities. Furthermore, face-to-face learning is more fruitful than distance learning in oral practice. In other words, online EFL learning decreased direct interactions between the participants of the educational process and deteriorated oral communication. Another problem is the general instructors' and students' unpreparedness for online EFL learning. Subsequently, any language learning course demands a strong will, self-discipline, or responsibility on the part of the learner. Finally, online EFL classrooms are often devoid of non-verbal communication elements that contribute much to tight teacher-learner contact.

Taken together, distance education appears to be a relatively new practice in the overall educational system. Online EFL learning appears to be an alternative solution for the learning process in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it raises many problems for teachers and students, it also benefits the participants of the learning process. The wide variety of online courses generated by well-qualified instructors makes it possible to choose the optimal goal-oriented program of EFL learning for each student. Undoubtedly, distance education offers a range of advantages for participants of the educational process in terms of mobility, flexibility, interactive learning and communication, personalization, feedback, and assessment. Implementation of distance learning in EFL classrooms favourably affects psychological and pedagogical aspects of the educational process. Moreover, it contributes to students' personal and professional development, motivation, critical thinking, initiative, engagement, and sense of responsibility. In addition, distance learning reduces the participants' moral and psychological load in the educational process in knowledge exchange.

3. Language learning strategies in online EFL learning

Closing Ukrainian higher educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic has made teaching and learning move to the online format. Distance language learning environments mediated by technology underwent "quite dramatic shifts in pedagogies developed for more traditional settings, requiring both learners and teachers to rethink their practices" (White, 2017, p. 140). In his study of the technology used in English language teaching, Mofareh (2019, p. 169) discusses the necessity of "the education sector to keep apace of the global technological revolution by adopting modern technological means such as computerization, multimedia devices, mobile phones, audio/visual effects applications, and social media".

The primary goal of EFL learning in Ukrainian universities is to develop the student's communicative competence. The latter is regarded as

the ability to obtain precise information while reading authentic texts, comprehend the other speaker's speech, and express his/her viewpoint orally and in the written form of speech. Thus, the EFL course entails not only language competence but also communicative one. The latter is represented by an impressive array of skills mastered in different communicative settings. Commenting on language teaching mediated by ICTs, Gilakjani (2017, p. 102) notes that "learners will be more motivated and guided to communicate with each other through technology-based English teaching". As a result, the process of acquiring the repertoire of necessary skills will be more student-centered and less time-consuming.

"To create the kind of structured, non-threatening, inclusive online learning space which learners need in order to explore, exchange information, connect and apply ideas and successfully develop their language skills" (Murphy, 2016, p. 61), instructors must transform existing teaching skills and master novel didactic methods, calling for not only technological innovation but pedagogical innovation (White, 2017, p. 135). Furthermore, this shift towards delivering information digitally implies a need to optimize resources and change the paradigm of traditional EFL teaching into an interactive teaching-learning process. Consistent with this view, to create an effective learning environment, a distance mode should involve a teacher who acts as a mediator and appropriate materials. In contrast, the very integration of teaching and learning modes should reflect and work toward all learners's learning aims and needs.

Modern approaches to EFL teaching and learning are based on the concept of communicative learning. Instead of learning English through grammar practice and assignments for translation, the students are actively involved in peer communication and interaction with the teacher. From the communicative approach to language learning, the students are no longer regarded to be the passive receivers of information to be delivered. In contrast, they act as active participants in learning by practicing a lot and through personal experience. However, regardless of communicative nature, different activities for mastering a foreign language are often generated to accomplish specific learning objectives.

In their comprehensive study of linking learning objectives, pedagogies and technologies, Huang et al. (2019, p. 54) outlined possible instructional strategies/pedagogies to match types of learning objectives. The suggested strategies are directed towards both mastering academic knowledge and developing various skills. Many strategies can be applied in many ways: drill and practice, mastery learning, programmed learning, direct teaching, role-playing, experience-based learning, tutorial, lecture,

exploratory learning, simulations, case study, concept attainment, debate, collaborative learning, project-based learning, and many others. A diverse pedagogical approach is appropriate for learning outcomes of motor skills, attitudes, verbal information, cognitive and intellectual skills. For instance, concept attainment strategy works as an inductive model designed to teach concepts using examples and enables students to become aware of conceptualizing. Project-based pedagogy is applied to coach the team, keep students on task and encourage them to be productive. In their turn, students develop self-management and collaboration skills.

The essential characteristic of EFL learning with the help of ICTs is its evident interdisciplinary nature. Specifically, EFL learning is regarded as specific problem-oriented language learning involving obtaining purely theoretical verbal information and instructional strategies entailing effectiveness and practical outcomes. Pedagogical methods and procedures used in EFL distance learning can be classified into several groups. The first group includes the methods promoting interaction between a student and educational resources, excluding the instructor's presence. They are of multimedia character and foster creating printed, audio-, video-materials and educational content transmitted via computer networks. The second group comprises the methods of the so-called 'personalized' learning realized through teacher-learner or learner-learner oral (telephone video call) or written (messaging or writing emails) communication. The methods by which the teacher directly delivers information to the students without their actual participation in the educational process make up the third group. These methods are typical of conventional educational systems and are undergoing considerable changes under the influence of ICTs introduced into EFL learning. Finally, the last group incorporates the methods characterized by active collaboration between the participants in EFL virtual classroom. They are mainly applied while having a lively debate on some not hackneyed topics. Students are thus offered to find solutions to non-essential problems by posing questions, coming up with new ideas, making predictions, collecting and analyzing data, making conclusions, communicating their ideas and findings to others.

Incorporating distance learning in the EFL classroom does not impose limitations on the number of course participants. On the contrary, "emerging paradigms for distance language teaching made possible different combinations of individual and collaborative language learning environments" (White, 2017, p. 135). Collaborative forms of distance communication often prove to be more effective in EFL learning as they enhance peer collaboration and interaction during a goal-oriented activity. A

sense of community helps students realize that they are part of a class and can benefit and learn from each other. Ryberg & Davidsen (2018, p. 144) understand such knowledge exchange as a type of communication where the interactions include a scholarly or subject related dimension and extends beyond purely informal and informal interaction. The learning environment more often refers to “the complex, local ecology of a course, including specific tools and content and constellations of learners, teachers, tasks, and interactions, including over time” (White, 2017, p. 135). Therefore, most definitions of distance learning emphasize its heterogeneous nature, manifested through the mix of different learning environments.

The creation of new effective online courses should be based on the principle of building EFL competence and the development of digital skills among students and teachers. Therefore, teachers’ and students’ assessment of perceptions and attitudes towards virtual education is “significant for assessing the quality of the educational process as practiced at distance” (Almehli, 2021, p. 47). According to Koszalka et al. (2019, p. 13), “with the emergence of new types of interactive technologies, formal and informal educational resources and environments are being inundated with opportunities for learners to interact with content in multiple ways through a variety of digital materials and experiences”. More to the point, students working online gain unrestricted access to authentic language resources to work on each of the four language skills. For example, to enhance students’ listening and speaking skills, the teacher can make a practical language laboratory or create an online video conference. To improve writing skills, the teacher can introduce writing emails, preparing the messages individually or collaboratively. Among the other alternatives, wikis, blogs, forums, online noticeboards, and walls are worth mentioning. In addition, treasure hunts and web puzzles turn out to be valuable resources for developing reading skills.

Distance learning of a foreign language with ICTs should ensure pursuing definite educational goals. First, it should practise and develop reading skills through constant exposure to authentic resources on the Internet. Second, students must master listening skills by listening and comprehending adapted and authentic audio texts corresponding to their language level. Third, distance learning should be designed to boost translating skills and edit texts offered to be rendered by the teacher. Fourth, students should be involved in conversation modes like monologue and dialogue to advance their speaking skills. Fifth, it is essential to expand the active and passive vocabulary of modern English, representing the current stage of English culture development and its socio-political norms. Sixth, learning a foreign language should be focused on advancing global skills

essential to being a lifelong EFL learner and being successful in the rapidly changing and unpredictable world of the 21st century.

Along with developing basic language competence needed to engage in conversation and being actively involved in the learning activity, students should be able “to apply their knowledge to solve learning and social problems, and to analyze and organize information so they can make decisions” (Lin, 2018, p. 4). Teachers need to know how to induce learners to work in new educational environments, critically assessing the situation and making their own decisions. Lin (2018, p. 1) believes that “learning critical thinking skills helps students to select relevant and useful information, to generate and evaluate the information received, to find effective ways of achieving their aims, and thus to become better problem solvers and decision makers”.

The concept of critical thinking is complex and is very often activated in everyday life. It always “draws on an issue that seems relevant, astonishing or even threatening for the thinker, an observation, a given argument, something somebody said, sang, preached or taught, a feeling of bewilderment, a slogan in the media, something seen in a movie or experienced in the streets and in everyday job routines” (Jahn, & Kenner, 2018, p. 87). Critical thinking is generally regarded as an analytical style of thinking in which different viewpoints on an issue are determined and evaluated to take decisive, deliberate actions. Critical thinking skills in the EFL classroom cannot be developed spontaneously but initiated by the instructor. The latter sets goals and predicts learning outcomes demonstrating that they are feasible.

The ability to rethink a particular issue or topic proposed for discussion revolves around already acquired knowledge and comprehension of the learned material. When learning outcomes are provided to students, they can critically think about information and construct their answers in a meaningful way. In this respect, revising grammar rules or extending their vocabulary will not encourage building good critical thinking skills. Inquisitiveness plays a fundamental role in this process as it drives learners to gain new knowledge and apply it in the corresponding context. Online EFL learning encourages students to construct their knowledge on the project they are involved in, reason, and be different from the rest of the class. Thus, even involved in collaborative projects, each student can find unique solutions to the problem and contribute a lot to better understanding of the problem. A problem-based approach unfolded in the online setting, enables students to focus on the purpose and the audience the project is directed to rather than on a teacher-driven assignment. In our view,

knowledge acquisition under controlled educator's guidance is not the ultimate mode of EFL learning.

Working collaboratively in an online learning environment raises the issues of developing good pragmatic skills. In his major study on technologies for teaching and learning intercultural competence and interlanguage pragmatics, Sykes (2017, p. 128) assumed that "pragmatic behaviors are a fundamental component of identity expression and must be considered from a transnational perspective that enables understanding dynamic, evolving, heterogeneous, communicative behavior". The pragmatic component of foreign language competence includes interpreting and independently constructing utterances realized in specific contexts and masterly using the communication modes preserving logical organization, cohesion, and rhetorical effectiveness. Sykes (2017, p. 123) noted that pragmatic skills are needed for success in a variety of contexts.

The complexity of pragmatic skills development lies within the fact that pragmatics is indispensable in speech and cannot be isolated from linguistic and sociocultural competence. Consequently, it should be considered while teaching and learning a foreign language at any stage of its acquisition. Online learning of foreign languages puts forward creating certain communicative situations in which the language is a medium of communication rather than an object of study. These situations include role-plays, debates, case studies, task-based activities, and others. Irrespective of any learning strategies, pragmatic competence is centered on the principle "input - interaction - output". In this case, its development starts with identifying the particular speech samples containing pragmatic units and analyzing the communicative situation. The next phase presupposes practicing the use of language means with definite communicative intention. The last phase is concerned with producing individual speech acts employing acquired pragmatic competence and skills. Overall, the pragmatic component of communicative competence corresponds to the ability to construct and adjust utterances regarding societal norms and choose the appropriate lingual and extralingual means. In EFL learning, the development of pragmatic competence is sustained by selecting appropriate materials and exercises visualizing the pragmatics of communicative units.

Developing EFL students' language skills and autonomous learning are issues of considerable concern. Distance learning is a new try to improve students' language skills since they practise listening, reading, speaking, and writing via different online resources, platforms, and interactive tasks. Consequently, the teaching material designed for effective EFL learning combines all-purpose activities focused on advancing foreign language skills

with communicative and pragmatic skills to respond to each learner's needs and learners' community demands. Furthermore, the implementation of EFL distance learning empowers students to be more active language users and raises chances to be exposed to a more exciting and interactive learning environment.

4. Conclusion

In today's world, pervaded mainly by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational settings for EFL learning are shifted from conventional in-class to distance learning. There are many reasons for such preference except for the coronavirus crisis. Thanks to distance learning, students living in remote areas have a chance to take foreign language instruction. Specifically, EFL learners studying in distance mode acquire new language and communication skills, engagement, and dedication to work efficiently in the created academic setting. The latter has been relatively new and unfamiliar to them, substantially impacting their personal and professional development and application of learning strategies. Online EFL learning offers flexibility, updated information, rich and unlimited online resources. Learners are regarded as developing strong identities becoming individual learners able to be effective participants in learning communities. However, despite the numerous merits to students, there are some demerits. The latter include deteriorating interpersonal interaction and oral communication, lack of digital skills and resources, slow Internet connection, and others.

The evidence from this study suggests that EFL learners in Ukraine are gradually changing their attitudes to efficient foreign language learning, shifting from teacher-dependent learning on teachers to autonomous. Furthermore, it implies to indicate that they are starting to deploy various strategies to facilitate their learning and take more personal responsibility for their studies. In conclusion, EFL learner training should be incorporated into designing materials to emphasize the efficacious role of learning strategies in facilitating language study.

In EFL teaching, teachers should foster learners' oral and written language skills development by implementing various methods or strategies and at the same time increasing the students' motivation and engagement in the teaching and learning process. Based on the students' psychological characteristics and needs, EFL teaching aims to improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills by exploiting various methods in the virtual classroom. The methods favourably underpin the EFL learning process, advancing students' language skills and developing their critical thinking and

pragmatic skills. Better understanding of online EFL context should enable university administrators to address their students' needs more fully.

Future work should focus on studying theoretical and practical aspects of online EFL learning and constructing new effective distance learning courses with high academic content.

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