

VII International Forum on Teacher Education

Distance learning in the period of pandemic COVID-19: comparing, analyzing, drawing conclusions

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to study and compare the opinions of teachers and students on DL in the studying process of foreign language. The analysis of the data obtained allows us to identify its strengths and weaknesses, both from the point of view of the organization of the educational process, and from the point of view of its methodological and pedagogical support, and understand how this experience can be used in further organization of online.

Research methods. To collect analytical data, an online survey was conducted among about 70 students and the same number of teachers from universities in Central Russia. For the survey, universities were selected with both linguistic and non-linguistic training profiles. As part of the questionnaire, open-ended questions were provided, which made it possible to better know the opinion of the respondents. According to the data obtained, about 70% of students have a positive and even excellent attitude towards DL. Slightly more than 15% were negative about this. Disadvantages of DL: about 60% of teachers and students consider the lack of direct communication as a disadvantage of DL. About 70% of the surveyed categories are dissatisfied with the quality of communication.

Results and recommendations: results of the research showed strong and weak sides of the organization of distant learning while its massive integration, in particular, at universities. Statistics that reflect students' and teachers' opinion about it, allowed to outline main strategies of its development in terms of foreign language learning in the absence of emergency.

Key words: distant learning, foreign language teaching, ICT, pandemic, students, teachers of foreign languages.

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Published by Kazan federal university and peer-reviewed under responsibility of IFTE-2021 (VII International Forum on Teacher Education)

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Introduction

In order to prevent the spread of coronavirus infection and in accordance with the order of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation of March 14, 2020, all educational institutions of the Russian Federation were recommended to switch to the education in electronic information and educational environment (Popova, Balandin, & Dedyuhin, 2020).

According to the data provided by UNESCO 2 billion of students (Kozarenko, 2018) and 60 millions of teachers all over the world have switched into the distance education (Borges, Tardif, & Karsenti, 2020). Massive transition of education into digital format presents invaluable experience for the conduction of scientific researches in terms of distance education (DE). In many countries there is a global study of the data on DE received in the period of pandemic, many issues of scientific journals are devoted to it (Ferrand, 2020).

In terms of Russian educational environment this topic is being highly discussed during scientific conferences and in publishing materials. The range of them reflects critical statements (United Nations Organizations, 2020), others present the analyses of their professional experience, for instance, in pedagogical institutions (Antonova, 2020; Alekhina & Makarova, 2020) etc. The synthesis documents have appeared in which supervisors of leading educational institutions analyze and systematize the peculiarities of the work of universities in the conditions of extraordinary situations, learning from first lessons.

Literature review

It is rare nowadays to find a foreign language (FL) teacher who is digitally inept. Compared to other subjects, foreign language teaching requires more intense use of authentic materials in the language being taught, and the Internet is the primary source of these. Still, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the massive shift to distance learning, we can talk about the different uses of information and communication technology (ITC) for education, and more particularly, for teaching living languages (LL) before and during the pandemic (Grégoire & Karsenti, 2013; Interfax Education, 2020; Karsenti & Kozarenko, 2019; Kozarenko, 2018). Previously, digital skill sets varied widely among teachers (Karsenti, Kozarenko, & Skakunova, 2020): individuals explored solitary paths at their own pace.

However, with the advent of COVID-19, they were forced to rapidly readjust their attitude toward digital learning and hastily upgrade their teaching practices (Raybaud, 2020a; Raybaud, 2020b; Laboratory of Media Communications in Education of Higher School of Economics, 2020). Now, with the assistance of self-help groups and similar initiatives to show them how online learning platforms work, the differences in teachers' digital skills have more or less leveled off. However, there remains the thorny problem of choosing the best methods for organizing schoolwork. In the thick of things, teachers also have to adapt quickly and nimbly to changing circumstances.

Under pressure of the pandemic, teaching has transitioned to remote modes so swiftly that many teachers simply copy-and-paste their classroom practices to a digital format. This can quickly devolve into job dissatisfaction and work overload, exacerbated by poor Internet connections and other technical nuisances. How have teachers of French as a foreign language (FFL) adjusted to the new work conditions? What methods have proven effective? What lessons can we learn from their experiences? These questions provide the motivation for this study.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the research is to study and compare the opinions of teachers and students on DL in the studying process of foreign language.

The objectives are the following:

- to study the aspects of language teachers' work in the period of COVID-19;
- to analyze and compare the opinions of teachers and students on distant education (DE) while learning foreign languages in the period of the pandemic;
- to consider strengths and weaknesses of DE from the perspective of the organization during the educational process as well as from the perspective of the didactic and pedagogical assistance;
- to analyze this experience in order to interpolate it the format of blended learning or DE out of emergency.

Hypothesis. Starting the research we considered that the results of the survey among teachers and students would help to recreate the general picture of all the aspects and peculiarities of studying only in the emergency as well as to elicit useful conclusions in terms of the organizational side of DE or with the help of its elements in traditional format.

Methodology

To better grasp FFL teachers' recent perceptions of distance learning, we administered a questionnaire at the end of a university academic year that unfolded under confinement conditions. Of all the FFL teachers practicing in Central Russia, approximately 70 voluntarily agreed to participate in our survey, enabling a quantitative analysis of the responses.

Exact number of participants (teachers and students) constitutes 140 people.

The questionnaire focused on their current teaching practices. It also included open-ended questions designed to elicit individual experiences and concerns. This allowed enriching the content of the questions and gaining deeper insights into the teachers' opinions.

It takes time to properly understand a phenomenon. Data must be analyzed and compared, the findings must be discussed, and so forth. Timely studies containing the latest data are required to fuel this process.

Hence, while waiting for our research results, we perused the French media to gather the views and experiences of researchers and journalists. Among the diverse topics, we noted dwindling motivation in students, online learning fatigue, and the potential of hybrid university courses (Raybaud, 2020); lack of human contact (Raybaud, 2020); and the future of virtual education (Kozarenko, 2018).

A survey conducted by EDHEC found that 67% of people aged 15 years and older in France considered the distance learning experience as positive and more individualized (Ferrand, 2020).

In Russia, a study by the National Research University's Higher School of Economics (HSE, 2019) found that university professors with a science degree self-rated their distance technology skills at 3.2 out of 5, and one quarter of them had never used video tools to participate in a webinar, videoconference, or similar event (Interfax, 2020).

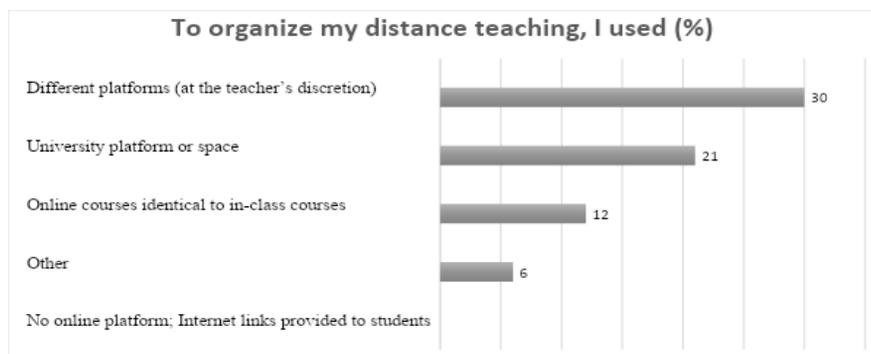
Another HSE study of teachers' perceptions of distance learning (Laboratory for media communications in education, 2020) identified the following main problems: slow Internet speed for both children and teachers, especially in small- and medium-sized cities and rural areas; difficulty choosing a dedicated platform (notably for rural schools); inadequate technology devices for teachers and children; and lack of digital skills.

Results

The determination of the attitude among foreign language teachers and students towards the organization of distance education in the period of pandemic demonstrates that there are substantial differences. If it possible to characterize the students' opinions by a great range of possible variety of their answers, in particular, starting from neutral (approximately 40%) to positive (one third of the surveyed) and the absence of radical disapproval of DE (0%), the great majority of teachers express their negative attitude to it.

In the context of quick change of the educational framework from traditional to online one, teachers have tried to do their best in adapting to new conditions of the teaching process by using all the opportunities to the maximum. That is why a little more than 60% chose digital platforms on their own and less than a half of them managed to use digital educational platforms of the institutions. In other words, over 60% of the surveyed teachers opted for commonly available online platforms (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype) versus about 25% who used the university's own platform or space (Figure 1). All courses were interactive, that is, 0% of the platforms were unidirectional. When computers had limited capacity, emails were used, as described in just one "Other" response.

Figure 1. *FFL teachers' use of distance learning systems during the pandemic*

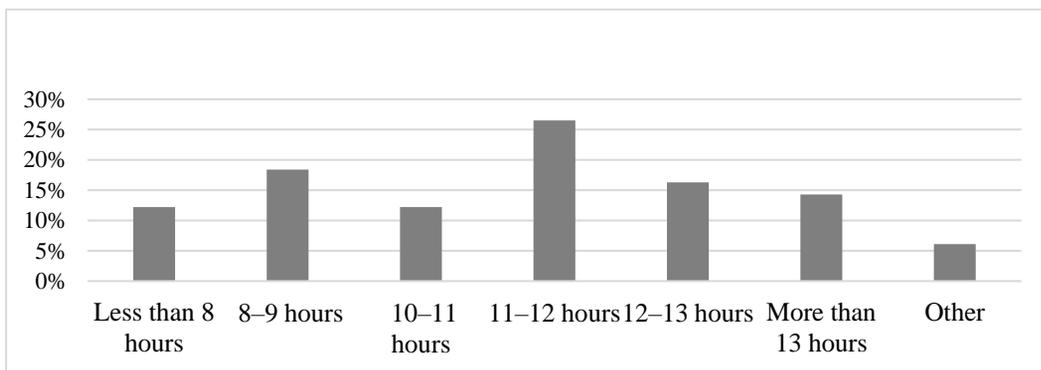


In some extreme and solitary cases the teachers had to turn to sending of homeworks via email (as a rule, it was connected with the technical state of their computers). The results of the survey prove that 2% of the surveyed students received their homeworks via email. 42% of them used educational online platforms that were chosen by their teachers and 55% of the surveyed studied on the platforms provided by their institutions.

The emergent format of quick and massive transition into digital education has influenced the change of habitual regime of study and teaching which was expressed in the considerable increase of work time for teachers as well as for students. Only 20% of teachers managed to maintain the same working hours; while 75% noted that the significant increase: up to 12 hours (25%), and more than 12 hours for 30% of the surveyed teachers.

Did the distance learning modes make more work for the teachers? The results show that almost 70% noticed that their workday lasted more than eight hours (Figure 2). It is worth mentioning that the official working week for teachers had already been a rather lengthy 36 hours. During the pandemic, for almost 30% of the respondents, the online workday exceeded the normal three to four hours, and for 14%, it lasted over 13 hours. The teachers apparently worked from 66 to 72 hours a week. In some cases they worked 15 hours a day, for a 90-hour week. This is 2.5 times the regulation work week.

Figure 2. *FFL teachers' workday duration during the pandemic*



As two teachers explained in their open-ended responses, "... and this doesn't include the weekend [the days that are considered to be official non-working days]. We gave them instructions every day of the week, especially Sunday, and at all hours of the day.

And I should add, this was at the request of the students”; “When we first made the transition to online teaching, the work lasted about 17 or 18 hours a day, with no days off.”

We turn now to the perceived advantages and shortcomings of distance learning. The three main advantages, according to the teachers, was that online teaching was more individualized, it was more interactive, and it allowed greater control and assessment of the students’ work (see Figure 3). On the other hand, only a small percent of teachers (10% or less) felt that the quality of their teaching improved, that they grew professionally, or that their students were more motivated to learn (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *FFL teachers’ perceptions of the advantages of distance learning during the pandemic (professional aspects)*

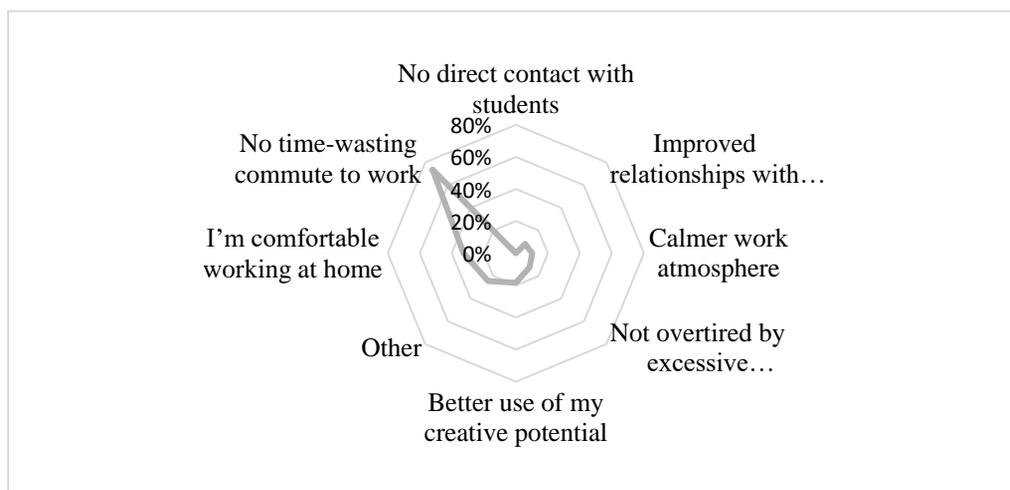
Parameters	%
New ways to explain new material	6%
High student motivation	8%
More time for professional growth	8%
Improved quality of teaching	10%
Teaching is more interesting	18%
Other	20%
Time-consuming, but useable over the long term	20%
High interactivity	29%
More regular and rigorous student monitoring	39%
Facilitated an individualized approach	43%

Concerning the advantages of distance learning, some teachers replied rather forcefully: “No advantages! On the contrary!”; “It’s exactly the opposite!!!”; “The way we had to work, in other words, with no preparation, no special training, none at all”; “There’s no advantage, technologically. We’re not ready to deliver massive online courses”; “I haven’t noticed any particular advantages. There are more downsides!”

There were also positive comments, for example: “It’s a good alternative in case of unforeseeable circumstances so we can have continuity”; “New assessments methods have come along, so we can record and view the courses.”

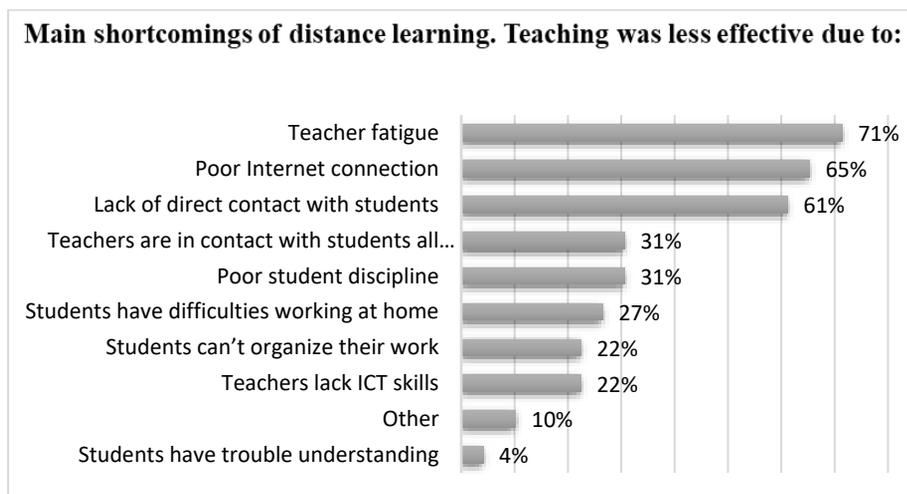
In personal terms (Figure 4), the teachers felt that one of the main advantages was not wasting time on the commute to work. In a big city like Moscow, for example, distance is a major issue. Nevertheless, they pointed out that they had to spend that time preparing the courses and monitoring their students' work. Only one third of the teachers felt comfortable working at home.

Figure 4. *FFL teachers' perceptions of the advantages of distance teaching during the pandemic (personal aspects)*



Almost 20% of the teachers felt that remote work allowed them to better realize their creative potential. A small percentage (10%) said that their work had become calmer and that they were no longer tired out from communicating with their students. Notably, 75% expanded on their responses to express strongly negative feelings about distance learning as the main form of education. For example, they complained that, "It's not normal not to be able to see your students in private!"; "I don't see any advantages in personal terms"; "No advantages, but lots of stress"; "It's exactly the opposite"; "No advantage!"; "There are none. Too much time on the computer, lack of communication, and not enough time out from technology" (Figure 5).

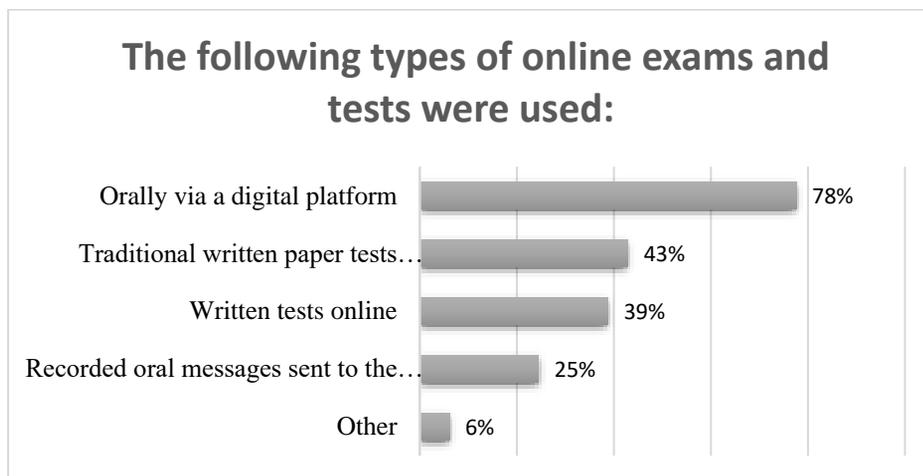
Figure 5. *FFL teachers' perceptions of the shortcomings of distance learning during the pandemic*



A predominant complaint voiced by 60% to 70% of respondents was teacher fatigue, followed by lack of direct contact with the students and poor Internet connections. Next was a group of shortcomings that accounted for 27% to 31% of the total complaints. First, the teachers had to be available day and night for seven days straight for students. Two other shortcomings in this group were the students' declining discipline and the difficulties they had doing their schoolwork at home. A third group of shortcomings concerned the students' inability to organize their work and the teachers' inadequate digital skills.

In the open-ended responses, the teachers recounted that: "Our employer always abuses the communication limits. It's 24/7!"; "All that time we saved by not commuting, we now spend at the computer"; "The technical specificities of remote teaching: replies take longer, and it also takes time to activate the microphone"; "We don't have as much choice of teaching practices as we do in the classroom."

The greatest problem for the teachers was online assessment, including verifications, tests, and exams. Accordingly, we formulated a question about their monitoring and oversight systems (Figure 6).

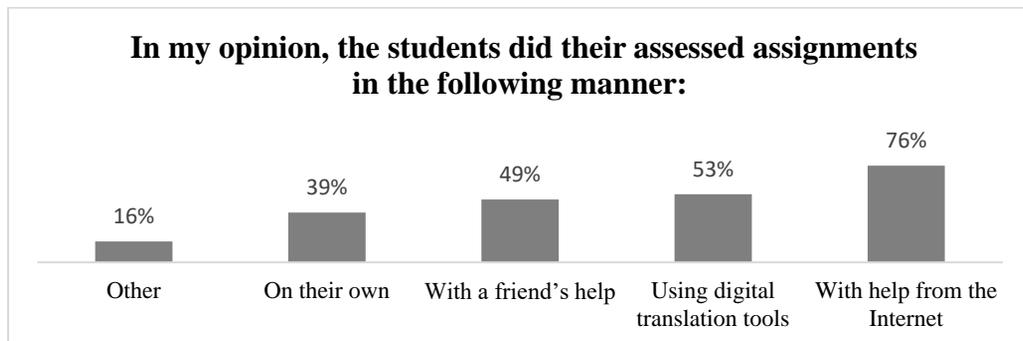
Figure 6. *FFL teachers' use of assessment methods during the pandemic*

Almost 80% of the teachers continued to use traditional oral exams via a digital platform. Half as many (43%) preferred to use the written tests they had used in the classroom, with the answers sent to the teacher. Almost 40% tried out online tests, and one quarter (25%) experimented with recorded oral responses sent by students to teachers.

In the open-ended responses, some teachers added that they also used ongoing monitoring to make their assessments. Other teachers did without such methods.

Unsurprisingly, assessment was a concern for the teachers. The assessment had to cover work that the students did on their own, which is hard to monitor remotely. According to the teachers, autonomous online schoolwork is no longer autonomous in the strict sense. Almost 80% of the teachers believed that the students used the Internet to complete their work, and almost half were convinced that the students used digital translation tools to do their tests (Figure 7).

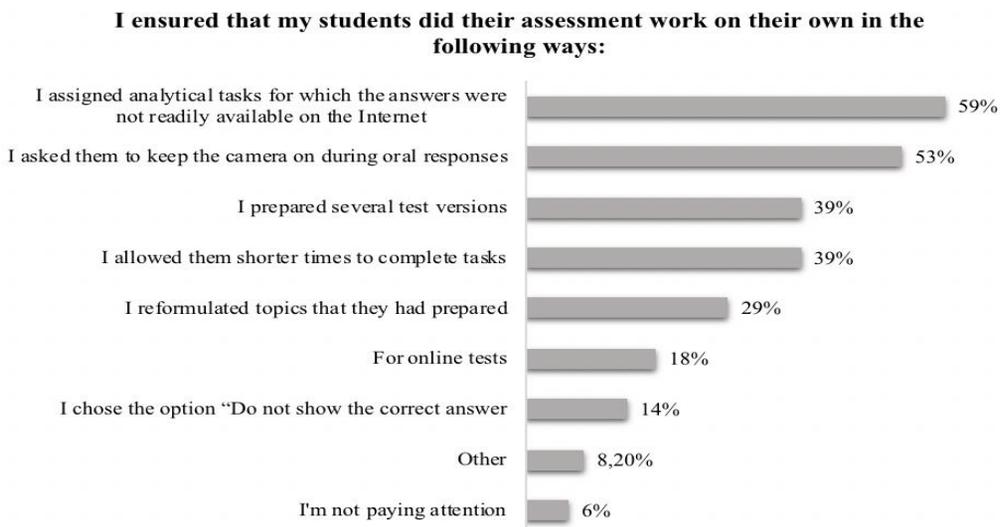
Figure 7. *FFL teachers' perceptions of their students' autonomous work when assessed remotely*



At the same time, one teacher out of four believed that the students did their own work. We may interject here that they might not have been fully aware of all the ways that students can cheat.

According to the teachers: “Some students did their work on their own, and then others used that work to do theirs”; “They have all the options. Everything depends on how honest the student is and the circumstances”; “There’s no way to know whether they worked by themselves or not”; “It depends on the individual students. There are plenty of ways to get around the monitoring”; “It all depends on the students, their motivation, their ability to organize themselves.”

In our own teaching experience, we noted that students tend to get higher marks on their online tests compared to classroom tests. However, for a truly objective assessment, there must be some assurance that the student actually did the work. Aside from a few imaginative solutions (on teacher asked the students to give their answers with their eyes closed to be absolutely sure they were not reading from a screen), the monitoring appeared to be rather limited overall (Figure 8).

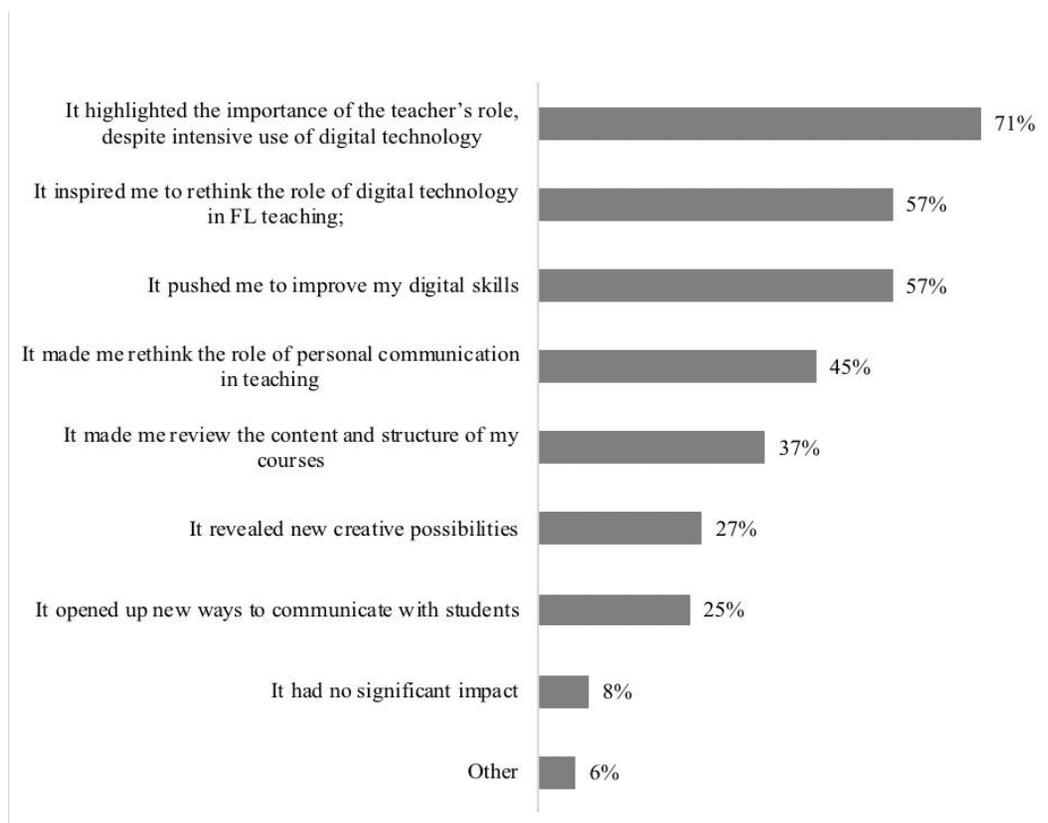
Figure 8. *FFL teachers' methods to monitor students' autonomous work during assessments*

Almost 70% of the teachers felt that student autonomy was determined by the type and content of the assessment tasks. One third of them reformulated the conversational topics immediately before the test so that the students' responses, although based on their knowledge, would be more spontaneous. The teachers also changed previously prepared dialogues into monologues so that the students could not read from texts on their screens.

The other methods were related more to technical aspects. The camera was activated during responses to monitor the student's face or the page on which they wrote. Tests were written in different versions to reduce the possibility of sharing correct answers. Response times were shortened to prevent students from searching the Internet for answers. Systems were configured to not show the correct answers immediately after the students entered their answers, preventing the students from sharing their answers.

How did the teachers' experience of distance teaching influence their own professional career and working style (Figure 9)?

Figure 9. *FFL teachers' perceptions of the impact of distance learning on their professional career*



This novel teaching experience enabled the teachers to rethink the teacher's role in education, which seemed to have been somewhat eclipsed by an excessive enthusiasm for technological advances. At the same time, over half the teachers had to figure out how best to use digital technology for FFL teaching. They also felt the need to upgrade their digital skills. Almost half the teachers gained a greater appreciation for the role of personal communication with their students. Only a small percentage (8%) felt that distance learning did not enrich their professional career in any way.

After the questionnaire was completed, we asked the teachers to briefly describe what the most important lessons they took away from the online teaching experience.

There were not many open-ended responses, but they covered a range of opinions: “It’s absolutely impossible to get a good education”; “Distance learning could be a form of support when it’s impossible to arrange traditional-style education (teacher’s business trip or illness, student’s internship or illness), but it can never completely replace in-class teaching”; “The most important thing in teaching is personal communication”; “Distance learning is possible, and it also produces results. The students are more active”; “I can handle all the problems”.

Talking about the advantage of distance education, nearly 40% of teachers see it in the possibility to organise more scrupulous individual accompaniment of students and providing quick feedback while teaching them. Students in their turn highlight the higher degree of comfort (no waste of time on the road, more time for sleep etc.) - $\frac{2}{3}$ of the surveyed are satisfied with the possibility of sleeping more. Less than 15% say that it is interesting for them to work on online platforms.

Among the disadvantages of online education teachers and students note bad Internet connection (65% - teachers and 67% students). However, on the first rank teachers placed the fatigue - 71% of answers. Among students’ answers the first places are occupied by the lack of communication with their groupmates and they find it difficult to concentrate at home (50%). The lack of communication with students was marked by 61% of teachers. Each third student is complaining about the fatigue, irritability, and tiredness.

Discussion

Clearly, the pandemic has changed teachers’ work conditions. Based on the survey results and our own experience, we have attempted to identify the more salient issues. We propose that these would apply to teachers of other subjects and in other countries as well.

1. Pandemic-related stress
2. Disappearance of the notions of the workday and the day off
3. For many teachers, lack of personal space
4. No relief from departmental duties: full workload for teachers, regular course durations, regular monitoring schedules, regular research activity
5. For students living in areas with poor Internet access, extra work preparing supplemental online courses to compensate for the loss of virtual classroom time
6. Physical overload and low morale

7. Some teachers who lacked digital skills had to rapidly upgrade them so they could work with digital platforms and tools.
8. Generally, lack of digital expertise for course design, requiring additional preparation time
9. Lack of interprofessional coordination: no information sharing between teachers of different subjects
10. Ignorance of the extra workload for students
11. Digital fatigue caused by endless computer work
12. The need to work on didactic and psychopedagogical aspects with the students; more emphasis on work organization; moral support to help students overcome fatigue, problems transitioning to distance learning, and certain personal problems (e.g., isolation from the family, chronic medical conditions).

All these aspects described in the teachers' comments must be considered in the survey analysis. It is no accident that their responses were often exclamatory: they appeared to be exhausted. Let us now leave the emotional issues and entertain some rational reflections.

What lessons can we take away from the distance learning experience during the pandemic?

1. Teachers need to improve their digital skills. Sceptics should reconsider the potential of digital teaching methods. FL teachers can advance their career path by adopting digital methods.
2. The value and richness of human and educational communication should be recognized. Despite all the advantages of digital technology, communication remains the bearer of shared human feelings and experience, momentaneous reactions, and the human gaze. University students particularly appreciate this kind of communication, and they fondly remember their classroom discussions and group study sessions.
3. We have gained a fresh perspective on the teacher's key role in distance education. Given the growing need for teachers to coordinate the digital learning process, teachers need more support than ever to build their digital skills. In view of the hasty adaptation of education systems to the drastically changed circumstances, teachers should enjoy greater autonomy in selecting their teaching methods. Although some teaching functions may be lost in the digital space, there is more room for individualized learning. Thus, traditional forms of teaching give way to new forms, such as individual consultations, sophisticated assessment methods, creatively targeted video materials, and so on. All these materials and methods take time to prepare, which only adds to the teacher's already heavy workload.

4. We observed solidarity and mutual assistance among the teachers, who were always ready to come to the aid of their colleagues, solve technical problems, and find digital learning solutions.
5. Distance education shows good potential for individual learning. However, this increases the burden on teachers. They must customize their students' learning pathways and find the time to deal with each student separately.
6. In times of emergency, such as the pandemic, teaching conditions get more difficult, and it becomes necessary to create a climate of empathy and support for teachers (Goyette, 2020).

How can we make massive online learning more effective? Organizational aspects at the university level

1. Rethink teachers' work schedules. It takes longer to prepare online courses than classroom courses. Even when online courses are available, they must be updated, improved, and adapted, and marking schemes must be adjusted.
2. Different online course modes should be available, including synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid modes (Kozanitis, 2020). Furthermore, teachers should be able to choose their preferred modes.
3. Course durations should be more flexible to account for the assimilation of material via a computer screen. Breaks of varying lengths should be provided to prevent digital fatigue.
4. Student workloads and school day durations should be regulated.
5. Interprofessional cooperation and collaboration should be promoted and encouraged.

Organizational and didactic aspects: teaching work, and particularly FFL teaching

1. Working in close collaboration with colleagues helps reduce work overload.
2. The work week can be reduced by providing students with specific timelines for schoolwork and assignments and by making it clear that they must respect teachers' free time.

3. More time could be spent on explaining distance learning procedures to students. Ongoing feedback for students' problems should be provided via digital tools. Students need help with time management. This would help prevent declines in discipline, which are often related to fatigue.

4. Avoid reproducing classroom techniques in online courses. In order to improve the quality of online teaching, select teaching strategies that are more suitable for digital learning.

5. Take advantage of freely accessible authentic documents on the Internet. Students can use them for independent assignments, thereby fostering individualized learning. For example, in our FFL courses, we presented the course outline followed by a list of topics relating to the students' daily lives. The students were then asked to work on their own using authentic documents that they found online. The teacher could communicate with each member of the group to discuss areas of improvement and monitor their oral productions. We noted that this type of individual communication increased both their motivation and the quality of their work.

6. Review the notion of autonomous work in the context of distance learning. Experience has taught us that it is very rare that students do not consult the Internet, for example, translation sites, when preparing their written work. We may therefore extend the concept to that of digital autonomy, meaning a judicious use of digital tools to prepare work for assessment. In turn, this requires redefining the skills to be assessed.

7. Focus more on building a digital work culture in FFL students, especially for distance learning. Apply pedagogical strategies that promote a judicious and motivating use of digital technology for language teaching (Karsenti, Kozarenko, 2020).

From the outset, students should be provided with as many digital tools as possible for language learning (Kozanitis, 2020). This helps them organize their work and manage their time, and it sparks their interest in digital tools. An enthusiasm for technology can boost motivation to learn a foreign language.

8. To develop students' digital autonomy, place more emphasis on computer-assisted writing (Grégoire & Karsenti, 2013). Continuous technology advances are providing ever more effective help.

9. Reconsider and re-frame online assessment methods. Internet and communications technology for education (ICTE) tools show promising potential for learning assessments. Use these tools to encourage self-assessment and peer assessment.

Conclusion

The pandemic has created an urgent situation, resulting in widespread reliance on distance learning. This has raised awareness among teachers everywhere of the promising potential of virtual education. Based on their first-hand experience of the new realities, teachers are taking a fresh look at the digital paradigm for their professional practices, and they are eager to build their digital skills.

Nevertheless, despite the many pros of the new technology advancements, there are some cons to think about. Teachers and students will still be bound by the “master–disciple” relationship. Not only does this relationship enable the transmission of knowledge from one to the other, it also allows for the development of a personal bond between the two. This is the essential goal, and technology, with all its evolving ingenuity, cannot be allowed to override or supersede it.

Acknowledgements

This paper has been supported by the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia Strategic Academic Leadership Program.

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