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# ENGLISH TRAINEE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS LANGUAGE TEACHING

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*The temporary introduction of distance education at universities owing to the pandemic leads to the necessity to develop innovative methods of on-line teaching and learning that could become an adequate alternative of on-site teacher-student interaction and improve students' professional skills. The background of the research states that in tertiary language education whose main aim is to develop students' professional communicative competence it is of paramount importance to combine synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction with the former creating an opportunity for live communication and immediate feedback and the latter developing students' autonomy and being more flexible and convenient. As the two modes have different advantages the indices of their proper balance are still under discussion.*

*The present study aims to explore English trainee teachers' ability to reflect on the ways of on-line language learning and to find out their attitude towards synchronous/asynchronous teaching. The results of the questionnaire completed by 168 students of the Faculty of Foreign Philology at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University indicate that the majority of trainee teachers are on the whole satisfied with distance teaching and learning, though a great number of students consider the ratio of synchronous and asynchronous modes inappropriate. The findings of the research also suggest that trainee teachers would like more diversity in the tools used in distance education. Moreover, the more learning experience students have, the easier it is for them to adapt to different teaching conditions and the more willing they are to acquire the skills of working with various educational tools.*

*The received data may serve as the foundation for rationalizing the existing methods and techniques to increase the efficiency of trainee teachers' distance education.*

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***Key words:*** *distance education, professional communicative competence, asynchronous teaching, synchronous teaching, tertiary language education, trainee teachers.*

# ПОГЛЯД МАЙБУТНІХ УЧИТЕЛІВ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ НА СИНХРОННЕ Й АСИНХРОННЕ НАВЧАННЯ МОВИ

**Н. В. Тучина, В. В. Перлова, О. А. Чухно**

*Тимчасове введення дистанційного навчання у вищих закладах освіти унаслідок пандемії призвело до необхідності розробляти нові методи он-лайн навчання, що могли б стати адекватною альтернативою взаємодії викладача і студентів в умовах аудиторних занять і вдосконалювати професійні вміння останніх. У вищій мовній освіті, основною метою якої є формування професійної комунікативної компетентності здобувачів, вкрай необхідно комбінувати синхронний тип взаємодії, що створює сприятливі умови для живого спілкування й миттєвого зворотного зв'язку, з асинхронним, що є більш гнучким і зручним та розвиває здатність студентів до автономного навчання. Оскільки обидва типи взаємодії мають свої переваги, показники їхнього адекватного поєднання все ще залишаються невизначеними.*

*Подана розвідка має на меті дослідити здатність майбутніх учителів англійської мови здійснювати рефлексію стосовно методів дистанційного вивчення мови та з'ясувати їхнє ставлення до синхронного / асинхронного навчання. Результати опитування, проведеного серед 168 студентів факультету іноземної філології Харківського національного педагогічного університету імені Г. С. Сковороди, свідчать про те, що більшість учасників у цілому задоволені дистанційним навчанням, хоча значна кількість майбутніх учителів вважають співвідношення синхронного й асинхронного навчання неприйнятним. Отримані дані також дозволяють дійти висновку, що студенти хотіли б більшого різноманіття у виборі інструментів дистанційного навчання. Крім того, результати анкетування засвідчують той факт, що здобувачі вищої освіти з довшим навчальним досвідом легше адаптуються до різних умов навчання й частіше виявляють бажання оволодівати практичними вміннями роботи з різними освітніми інструментами.*

*Емпіричні дані можуть стати основою для раціоналізації вже існуючих методів і прийомів дистанційного навчання з метою підвищення ефективності професійної підготовки майбутніх учителів.*

***Ключові слова:*** *дистанційна освіта, професійна комунікативна компетентність, асинхронне навчання, синхронне навчання, вища мовна освіта, майбутні вчителі.*

**Introduction of the issue.** Severe quarantine constraints introduced due to the continuing spread of COVID-19 resulted in implementation of emergency remote teaching in educational institutions. The effectiveness of teaching and learning under such conditions heavily depends on teachers' ability to quickly shift from on-site education to the remote one creating the on-line learning environment which could become a viable solution to the absence of live interaction among the participants of the educational process and support students in achieving the learning goals.

The ultimate goal of tertiary foreign language education is the development of students' professional communicative competence as well as their life skills vital for dealing with both professional and everyday challenges. In remote education, this goal can be accomplished by using both synchronous (from Greek *sýnkhronos* 'existing at the same time') and asynchronous ('not coinciding in time' (Greek prefix *a-* 'not, without')) teaching modes with the former characterized by immediacy and interpersonal

interaction and the latter known for convenience, individual pacing and flexibility. It is evidence-driven that adequate combination of synchronous and asynchronous teaching has significant potential for stimulating students' language learning, communication, interaction, networking, autonomy increase, professional competence acquisition, e-learning tools and software management skills development. Since the two modes offer different benefits to teaching and learning, it is of paramount importance to select the best ways to blend them in order to take advantage of the both ones whenever possible.

One problem concerns timing during on-line lessons. While developing the ways of combining a/synchronous teaching modes, teachers are supposed to think over the amount of time students will spend on working in each mode. On the one hand, too much asynchronous work may lead to students' lacking the teacher's attention and their feeling ignored or socially isolated. What is more, this can result in fossilization of trainee teachers' foreign language speaking and pronunciation skills owing to the shortage of real time communication and immediate feedback. On the other hand, students who spend insufficient time studying asynchronously may fail to become autonomous learners in the future which will affect their professional and personal improvement after graduating.

Another matter of a considerable concern in the process of developing the techniques of blending synchronous and asynchronous teaching is the diversity of e-learning tools and activities used by the teacher. If the teacher sticks to a single e-learning tool, students may lose interest and become demotivated. Moreover, they will not be given a chance to get acquainted with modern e-learning software and it will have a negative impact on their professional competence and life skills acquisition. However, too much diversity may cause students' being overwhelmed and even frustrated due to the need to simultaneously focus on language learning and e-learning software management.

It is also necessary to mention that nowadays a lot of practitioners feel difficulties in teaching remotely because they stick to the techniques that were created and meant for teaching in the classroom but which do not work in distance mode without an appropriate adaptation. At the same time, modification of teaching materials for distance lessons requires deep understanding of peculiarities of synchronous and asynchronous modes and principles of their organization that make them different from traditional teaching.

**Current state of the issue.** Rapid technological advances in the area of information and communication technology have raised extensive research on distance education in the last few decades.

*A. Saykili* focuses on critical evaluation of various definitions of distance education and presents a new one that reflects the technological and pedagogical circumstances of the 21st century. The scholar defines distance education as a form of education which brings together the physically-distant learner(s) and the facilitator(s) of the learning activity around planned and structured learning experiences via various two or multi-way mediated media channels that allow interactions between/among learners, facilitators as well as between learners and educational resources [8]. *A. Saykili* emphasizes that learners in distance education are in the center of the learning experience taking more responsibility for their own performance. The researcher also points out that the instructor should serve as a guide rather than a source of

knowledge giving the learner more choice as to what tools to use and involve learners into decision-making process [8].

*N. S. Chen, H. S. Ko, K. Lin* and *T. Lin* categorize the mode of interaction in distance education into asynchronous, which allows the sequence of interaction between a teacher and a student to happen at different times, and synchronous (also called 'live' or 'real-time'), which requires the presence of both parties simultaneously for teaching and learning to take place [1]. It should be mentioned that in our study we share the scholars' viewpoint and define synchronous distance teaching as teaching which happens online when a teacher and a group of students take part in a lesson at the same time. Asynchronous teaching, on the contrary, involves a teacher and students working separately at different times with the use of various information and communication tools. Highlighting the two most important advantages of synchronous interaction in distance education, namely immediate feedback and increased level of motivation and obligation to be present and participate, the scholars describe an online synchronous learning model which covers synchronous lecturing and 'office-hours' modes [1].

*S. Hrastinski* explores the potential of synchronous communication in online discussion and proves that the use of a synchronous chat, as a compliment to asynchronous discussion board, affects participation positively with students feeling confident that other participants of the teaching and learning process will respond to their ideas [3].

*B. B. Levin, Y. He, H. Robbins* and *H. Holly* conduct comparative analysis of trainee teachers' reflective thinking in synchronous and asynchronous case discussions. The findings of the study indicate that the participants engaged in synchronous discussions have higher levels of critical reflection [5]. On the other hand, asynchronous e-learning is regarded by scholars as more suitable for discussing complex ideas [4]. It is claimed to be more flexible, reduce stress levels and foster students' independent learning [6].

*I. Pulity* discusses the pedagogical possibilities offered by the combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction in a translational e-language learning environment and analyzes the level of learner engagement with a/synchronous tools through instructor's perspective. The results of the questionnaire distributed to teachers by the researcher revealed that a hybrid e-learning approach generates high level of motivation and adequate levels of effectiveness [7].

*P. Fidalgo, J. Thormann, O. Kulyk* and *J. Lencastre* conducted a multinational study (in Portugal, the UAE and Ukraine) on students' perceptions on distance education. It was found out that among students' major concerns about distance programs were time management, motivation and English language skills, which, however, did not diminish their interest in taking online courses [2].

**The outline of unresolved issues brought up in the article.** Despite the numerous studies in the area of synchronous and asynchronous modes of distance education, foreign language teachers are in great need of scientifically grounded methods of remote teaching which would distribute, integrate and balance synchronous and asynchronous modes effectively. Since in the learner-centred approach, which is widely applied all over the world, students are viewed as equal participants of educational process, before developing such methods we consider it necessary to answer the questions that have been paid little attention to in scientific literature: What is future teachers' opinion on distance education currently provided by universities? How do they reflect on the modes of their e-learning

and their efficiency? Are they able to reflect on it as both learners and future teachers? We firmly believe that taking into account students' preferences in distance learning may significantly increase the effectiveness of the teaching process and enhance trainee teachers' academic performance.

**Aim of the research.** The aim of the study is to look deeper into trainee teachers' attitude towards the ways of integrating synchronous and asynchronous modes of language teaching in distance education and to explore their ability to reflect on the ways of on-line language learning.

**Results and discussion.** To explore students' experience of distance education in 2020-2021 we designed and administered a questionnaire to trainee teachers at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University. It was completed by 168 students of the Faculty of Foreign Philology majoring in English, 138 of them enrolled in the Bachelor's program in 2017 (33 students), 2018 (37 students), 2019 (33 students) and 2020 (35 students) and 30 in the Master's program in 2020. In order to ensure higher response rates and reliability of the data, we conducted the questionnaire on-line through Google Forms without collecting students' email addresses, which made the procedure anonymous, and limiting responses to one response per user. The questionnaire comprised 9 questions of the multiple-choice format. In the last question about the tools which teachers use in distance education students could select several options and add their own ones as well. Simple statistical tools were used to analyze the received data. The results of the survey are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1*

**The Data Collected through the Questionnaire**

| **Questions and response options** | **Year of studying at university** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **1st** | **2nd** | **3d** | **4th** | **1st (Master's program)** |
| | **Students' responses (%)** | | | | |
| **1. Are you satisfied with distance teaching at the faculty in 2020-2021?** | | | | | |
| Yes | 42.7 | 36.4 | 60.7 | 45.5 | 27.8 |
| No | 5.6 | 3 | 3.6 | 2.9 | 16.7 |
| Rather 'yes' than 'no' | 47.2 | 48.5 | 28.6 | 36.4 | 44.4 |
| Rather 'no' than 'yes' | 4.5 | 12.1 | 7.1 | 15.2 | 11 |
| **2. Do you think it is necessary to combine synchronous and asynchronous modes in distance education?** | | | | | |
| Yes. | 83.1 | 72.7 | 73.2 | 87.9 | 88.9 |
| No, I think it is enough to use the synchronous mode. | 13.5 | 24.2 | 16.1 | 3 | 0 |
| No, I think it is enough to use the asynchronous mode. | 3.4 | 3.1 | 10.7 | 9.1 | 11.1 |
| **3. Do you think the combination of synchronous and asynchronous teaching is balanced at the faculty?** | | | | | |
| Yes | 50.6 | 36.4 | 37.5 | 36.4 | 16.7 |
| No | 3.3 | 15.2 | 7.1 | 12.1 | 27.8 |
| Rather 'yes' than 'no' | 37.1 | 39.4 | 42.9 | 45.5 | 44.4 |
| Rather 'no' than 'yes' | 9 | 9.1 | 12.5 | 6.1 | 11.1 |
| **4. How many teachers combine synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction?** | | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All | 12.4 | 0 | 8.9 | 9.1 | 11.1 |
| Almost all | 49.4 | 21.2 | 30.4 | 21.2 | 27.8 |
| More than 50% | 13.5 | 24.2 | 23.2 | 24.2 | 11.1 |
| About 50% | 11.2 | 21.2 | 17.9 | 15.2 | 22.2 |
| Less than 50% | 7.9 | 6.1 | 12.5 | 18.2 | 11.1 |
| Few | 4.5 | 21.2 | 7.1 | 6 | 11.1 |
| Very few | 1.1 | 6.1 | 0 | 6.1 | 5.6 |
| **5. What do you think is the appropriate number of e-learning tools the teacher should use during his/her course in distance education?** | | | | | |
| 1-2 | 33.7 | 39.4 | 37.5 | 21.1 | 27.8 |
| 3-4 | 58.4 | 51.5 | 39.3 | 51.5 | 50 |
| 5-6 | 5.6 | 9.1 | 19.6 | 12.1 | 16.7 |
| 7 or more | 2.2 | 0 | 3.6 | 15.2 | 5.6 |
| **6. How many e-tools on average do teachers use at their courses?** | | | | | |
| 1-2 | 47.2 | 36.4 | 42.9 | 42.4 | 61.1 |
| 3-4 | 41.6 | 42.4 | 35.7 | 36.4 | 33.3 |
| 5-6 | 11.2 | 21.2 | 21.4 | 12.1 | 0 |
| 7 or more | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9.1 | 5.6 |
| **7. Do you think all teachers of the faculty should use the same e-learning tools for distance teaching?** | | | | | |
| Yes | 57.3 | 63.6 | 58.9 | 51.5 | 27.8 |
| No | 42.7 | 36.4 | 41.1 | 48.5 | 72.2 |
| **8. Do the teachers of the faculty use the same or different e-learning tools for distance teaching?** | | | | | |
| The same | 30.3 | 36.4 | 30.4 | 21.2 | 44.4 |
| Different | 69.7 | 63.6 | 69.6 | 78.8 | 55.6 |
| **9. Choose the tools your teachers use in distance teaching and add any other tools that are not mentioned.** | | | | | |
| Zoom | 96.6 | 100 | 98.2 | 100 | 100 |
| Google Meet | 94.4 | 87.9 | 89.3 | 100 | 88.9 |
| Skype | 76.4 | 75.8 | 58.9 | 27,3 | 16.7 |
| Google Classroom | 77.5 | 78.8 | 69.6 | 93,9 | 94.4 |
| MOODLE | 89.9 | 84.8 | 96.4 | 93.9 | 100 |
| Google Hangouts | 1.1 | 0 | 1.8 | 0 | 5.6 |
| Google Jamboard | 0 | 3 | 1.8 | 54.5 | 0 |
| Flipgrid | 1.1 | 15.2 | 12.5 | 0 | 0 |
| Pear Deck | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kahoot | 0 | 0 | 8.9 | 93.9 | 0 |
| Learning Apps | 3.4 | 9.1 | 5.4 | 3 | 5.6 |
| Social Media | 44.9 | 66.7 | 55.4 | 48.5 | 66.7 |

The results of the questionnaire suggest that students' experience of distance education in 2020-2021 was on the whole positive. Irrespective of the year of studying or the program they enrolled in, the absolute majority of the respondents opted for 'yes' or 'rather yes than no' in reply to the question whether students are satisfied with distance teaching at the faculty. The number of those who chose 'no' or 'rather no than yes' does not exceed 10%. However, the fact that negative answers are present is rather disturbing and cannot be ignored since such dissatisfaction might affect students' academic performance and their career in the future.

The idea that it is necessary to combine synchronous and

asynchronous modes of interaction was supported by 81.2% of trainee teachers on average. Thus, we can draw the conclusion that most students training to become teachers of English are aware of the importance of both modes of interaction in the development of their professional skills. Meanwhile, 13.5% of 1st-year students, 24.2% of 2nd-year students and 16.1% of 3d-year trainee teachers think that it is enough to use the synchronous mode. Such answers may testify that a considerable number of junior students are either not ready to take responsibility for their own learning and need additional support to learn to study autonomously or do not feel that doing asynchronous assignments contributes to the level of their professional competence. This conclusion is supported by the responses of 4th-year undergraduates, only 3% of whom opted for this answer, and students doing their Master's degree none of whom consider it enough to use the synchronous mode of interaction. Therefore, senior students may feel more confident while doing autonomous work and recognize its potential. The asynchronous mode as the only one necessary was chosen by 3% of students on average which can be explained by its convenience and affordability.

Regarding the third question, 50.6% of 1st-year students, 36.4% of 2nd- and 4th-year trainee teachers and 37.5% of 3d-year undergraduates believe that the combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes is balanced at the faculty. Moreover, on average 41.2% of all the respondents in the Bachelor's program incline to the option 'rather yes than no'. Thus, the received data suggest that most trainee teachers are satisfied with the proportion of the two modes used in distance education. Yet the number of students in Master's program who are of the same opinion is much lower with only 16.7% opting for 'yes' and 44.4% selecting the option 'rather yes than no'. The empirical data lead to the conclusion that the ratio between synchronous and asynchronous modes in teaching the latter category of students needs to be reconsidered.

As for the fourth question a significant percentage of the respondents believe that the majority of teachers combine the two modes of interaction in their work. At the same time the indices of trainee teachers who chose the options 'less than 50%', 'few', 'very few' are still high (13.5% of 1st-year students, 33.4% of 2nd-year students, 19.6% of 3d-year students, 30.3% of 4th-year students and 27.8% of trainee teachers studying for Master's degree). This suggests that some university teachers may not have acquired the skills of effective distance teaching and need further training in the area.

In reply to the fifth question a half of trainee teachers' studying for Master's degree, the absolute majority of 1st- , 2nd-, 4th-year undergraduates and about 40% of 3d-year students believe that it is appropriate to use 3-4 e-learning tools in distance education. The number of those who chose the option '1-2' is considerably lower (27.8%, 33.7%, 39.4%, 21.1% and 37.5% correspondingly). At the same time answering the sixth question about the number of tools teachers use in practice more respondents of the 1st (both in the Bachelor's and Master's programs), 3d and 4th year of studying opted for '1-2' than '3-4'. The results received suggest that a considerable percentage of students would prefer more diversity in the use of e-learning tools in distance education, although according to the opinion of most trainee teachers their number should not exceed 4. The option '5-6' was chosen by 11.2% of 1st-year students, 21.2% of 2nd-year students, 21.4% of 3d-year trainee teachers, 12.1% of 4th-year students and none of those who study for their Master's degree. Less than 10% of senior students and none of

junior trainee teachers opted for '7 or more'. Such indices may be considered a proof of students feeling overwhelmed when they have to deal with too many e-learning tools in distance education.

The analysis of the answers to Questions 7 and 8 indicate that the majority of undergraduates in Bachelor's program expect all teachers of the faculty to use the same e-learning tools in distance education but in fact the tools which are used in practice are different. In the meantime, the replies to Question 7 received from trainee teachers doing their Master's degree are diametrically opposite with 72.2% of them expecting their teachers to use different tools. It should be mentioned that the expectations of the majority of these students are met since 55.6% of them chose the option 'different' in reply to Question 8. Thus, we can make a conclusion that it is easier for senior students, who have more learning experience, to adapt to different teaching conditions. Moreover, they may be more willing to acquire practical skills of working with various educational tools which may be of use in their professional life.

Regarding the last question about the tools teachers use in distance education more than 90% of the respondents on average chose video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, which are used for synchronous teaching, and more than 80% of students opted for distance education platforms such as Google Classroom and MOODLE, which are used for asynchronous work. These data prove that the approach to selecting the tools for distance education at the faculty is not standardized and different teachers working in one and the same group of students use different tools for both synchronous and asynchronous work. On average about 55 % of trainee teachers also chose Social Media tools (Instagram, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) which are mainly used for arranging meetings, providing clarifications and brief consultations, conducting surveys, etc.

While all the tools mentioned above are popular among students irrespective of the year of studying, some other tools mentioned in the questionnaire were chosen by only one category of trainee teachers. For instance, Kahoot and Google Jamboard were selected by the majority of 4th-year undergraduates, Flipgrid was chosen by 15.2% of 2nd-year students and 12.5% of 3d-year trainee teachers, 9.1% of 2nd-year students also opted for Learning Apps.

Among students' own variants in response to Question 9 were Youtube (chosen by 1.1% of 1st-year students, 3% of 2nd-year trainee teachers and 5.6% of the participants studying for their Master's degree), Gmail (chosen by 1.1% of 1st-year students), Wordwall (chosen by 1.8% of 3d-year trainee teachers) and Quizlet (chosen by 5.6% of students in Master's program).

The received empirical data suggest that most teachers use at least 2 basic tools in distance education (one for synchronous teaching and one for asynchronous work) which is consistent with the responses to Questions 4 and 6. Still some teachers introduce additional e-learning tools which, on the one hand, may contribute to achieving the aim of the course and students' getting familiar with modern e-learning techniques, but on the other hand, may cause students frustration due to the constant need to learn new tools.

**Conclusions and research perspectives.** To sum up, the results of the questionnaire indicate that the attitude of most of the respondents to distance education at the faculty is on the whole positive irrespective of the amount of time they received professional training or the program they enrolled in. We can also see that trainee teachers have sufficient ability to reflect on their own learning. The

evidence is as follows. The majority of students (81.1%) believe that it is necessary to combine synchronous and asynchronous modes in distance education. Within this tendency more than 42% of all the respondents on average answered that they are satisfied with distance teaching and 36% on average state that synchronous and asynchronous modes are well-balanced at the faculty. On the other hand, many participants of the questionnaire are not content with the number of e-learning tools their teachers use in distance education. According to their responses, this number equals 1-2 while the appropriate one, in students' view, would be 3-4. Therefore, students clearly identify their preferences in distance education and define whether their preferences match with reality. Thus, students' answers do not contradict but rather complement each other.

Among the most important findings of the study is also the fact that senior students expect their teachers to use different e-learning tools which may be explained by their longer learning experience and higher adaptability to various teaching conditions. Junior students, on the contrary, prefer a more standardized approach to the choice of learning tools at the faculty. Therefore, they need more teachers' support while dealing with various platforms for distance education.

The results of the study also suggest that some teachers still may not possess the skills of effective distance teaching. Thus, further training in the area should be provided at the faculty to ensure the increase in the efficiency of the educational process and, as a result, students' higher academic performance.

The findings received in the study can lead to developing methods of distance teaching which take into account students' opinion on the issue.

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