

STUDYING ENGLISH UNDER COVID-19 QUARANTINE: UKRAINIAN AND INDIAN STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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The article deals with Ukrainian and Indian students' perspectives of studying English online during the pandemic. This study was conducted at National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" and Bharat Vidyalaya, Buldana, Maharashtra, India. A mixed method research design was used in the study: quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from two surveys completed by students anonymously as Google Forms. The research indicated that more Indian than Ukrainian students confirmed that they prepared for the English class. While nearly a third of Ukrainian students' suggestions on effectiveness of English lessons were about speaking and communication, Indian respondents also proposed preparation and revision. Indian students preferred learning something new to grades. Over half of Indian students and a third of Ukrainian students opted for working in groups. From the findings, we can see that most Indian and Ukrainian students had their working space, necessary devices and the Internet connection for studying online. Ukrainian students were more positive about feeling safer with their cameras turned off than Indian students. It was easier for most Indian and Ukrainian students to concentrate in a face-to-face class than in an online class. However, Indian students were mostly positive about studying English online. Most respondents indicated agreement about developing self-directed learning skills while studying English online. Ukrainian students chose speaking, reading and writing as skills better developed online, while Indian students opted for listening skills. The findings of the research provide valuable information related to students' attitudes towards studying English online considering which may improve teaching and learning distantly. The research results show that despite understanding the necessity of studying online, some students are reluctant to accept it fully. Moreover, there are some intercultural differences related to social distance in the cultures.

Keywords: English; online; distance learning; face-to-face; attitude; grouping; quarantine.

Introduction

Facing the reality of surviving 2019-2020 academic year, which was influenced by COVID-19 quarantine and restrictive measures, concepts of teaching and learning had to be reconsidered. The rapid timeframe, large numbers of educators and students involved, their unknown attitudes towards online learning caused a lot of questions and concerns (Hargis, 2020, p. 1). According to the IAU Global Survey Report, which aimed at fostering dialogue about the impact of COVID-19 on the future of higher education, two-thirds of universities were able to move teaching online, and one quarter reported that the most activities were suspended. The main challenges of the shift to distance teaching and learning might be technical issues, qualification of the educators, methodology and the requirements of specific fields of study (IAU, 2020, p. 11). Designing effective distance courses in the future, teachers of English need to take into account the experience of the previous academic year, analyse the evidence of students' learning and their feedback. Therefore, the exact consequences of the lockdown, social distancing and emergency digitalisation are to be analysed properly (IAU, 2020, p. 23).

Feedback from students is crucial for educators who strive for better results, building rapport between teachers and students, especially in the situation when they have to transform their offline English language class into online (Danley, 2016, p. 48). During the lockdown, when face-to-face communication is limited or not possible, such information is especially valuable. Asking students to reflect on their experience translates into empowering them with increased engagement and adjusting accordingly (William, 2013, p. 19; Graziano, 2016, p. 15). Google Form surveys are completed online, which is especially convenient during the

lockdown. The content of prompts depends on outcomes teachers intend to achieve: collecting formative assessment data, stimulating student self-analysis, focusing on instructional strategies, and communicating to the teacher (Marzano, 2012, p. 80-81).

The article aims to analyse the experience of Ukrainian and Indian students studying English online during the pandemic. To achieve this aim the following tasks are to be completed: to establish a general impression of students' learning experience, preparation for English classes, their attitudes to making online classes effective, motivation and grouping; to define students' attitudes to technical, psychological, methodological aspects and issues related to assessment studying English online.

Materials and methods

Research design. A mixed method research design was used in the study: quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from two surveys completed by students anonymously as Google Forms uploaded to Google Drive; Excel spreadsheets were used for analysis afterwards. Qualitative data was also received through analysing information of individual feedback and group discussions via Zoom sessions, which allowed the researchers to compare and contrast the responses from Ukrainian and Indian students.

Participants. This study was conducted at National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" and Bharat Vidyalyaya, Buldana, Maharashtra, India. The Ukrainian participants were first- year students, Indian participants were high school students practically of the same age range. First survey was completed by Ukrainian (N=45) and Indian students (N=60) in June 2020. Second survey was completed by Ukrainian (N=59) and Indian students (N=65) in November 2020. Therefore, over 500 students' responses to the first survey and 1240 responses to the second survey were analysed. All the respondents volunteered to participate in the surveys regarding their experience and attitude towards studying English online during the COVID-19 quarantine.

Instruments and procedure. The first survey consisted of five open-ended prompts about students' attitude towards online learning, preparation for English classes, suggestions for making them more effective, motivation and grouping. The Likert scale, consisted of a prompt and a set of five responses from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD), was employed for the second survey, which covered technical, psychological, methodological aspects and issues related to assessment studying English online. We used descriptive statistics to analyse the data: calculated the median (Mdn) of each item (what most respondents believe) and Inter-Quartile Range (IQR) of each item (how strongly respondents agree with each other).

Results and discussion

Studying English online was not new for Ukrainian and Indian students. However, having all classes online from home, which was not initially planned, evoked mixed feelings. The first survey consisted of five open-ended prompts about students' attitude towards online learning, preparation for English classes, suggestions for making them more effective, motivation and grouping. All the open-ended prompts used in the first survey provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their experience and communicate positive or negative messages to the teacher. The number of words in one response was not limited, that is why it varied from one word (like "yes", "nothing", etc.) up to 489 for Ukrainian and 77 for Indian students, but usually students responded using 5 – 20 words.

Ukrainian students were mostly positive about important things they learned during the pandemic: 80% of responses indicated positive experience, 12% responses were negative, 4% of respondents used humour. Overall, 63% of Ukrainian students wrote about their experience related to studying English, 27% focused on other subjects or skills, and 6% on life lessons in general. Besides mastering grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, Ukrainian students mentioned such interdisciplinary skills as structuring presentation, developing presentation skills, writing an academic paper, avoiding plagiarism, self-discipline, etc. Similarly, more than half of Indian students (55%) wrote about their experience related to studying English (speaking, reading, mastering grammar, etc.), 33% on interdisciplinary skills (the necessity of self-development, working hard, trying something new, etc.), and 12% focused on other subjects or skills (riding a bike, IT skills, cooking, etc.) Comparing responses of Ukrainian and Indian students we can see that more than half of each group focused on English, but Ukrainian students mentioned other subjects or skills (27%) more often than Indian students (12%), while Indian students wrote more about interdisciplinary skills (33%), which became actual because of the quarantine. The fact that during the second semester students studied face-to-face only about two months

influenced the responses: 16% of Ukrainian students referred to online learning and Zoom, the quarantine was mentioned in 4% of responses; students were mostly negative about the quarantine in general, but there were various opinions about distant learning. These results differ from other studies when students were mostly positive about distance learning (Akıllı et al., 2019; Lukianenko & Vadaska, 2020). At the same time, 6% of Indian students mentioned the quarantine, 3% – online learning, 6% – health, focusing on the importance of family values, being fit, relationship, cherishing life.

The majority of Ukrainian students (67%) positively responded to the second prompt about preparation for English lessons, stating that they were ready for English lessons. In particular, they mentioned the amount of time, which they spent on doing their home assignments, the tasks, which were interesting to complete, the necessity of practising more, that “the English lesson is more interesting if you are prepared”. Some Ukrainian students were not sure how to respond (20%), explaining their failures by tiredness, difficulties related to their first experience of online learning, challenging topics, problems with time management, or tasks which they did not want to complete, for example, making up dialogues. Others did not prepare for English lessons (6.5%) because of the necessity to focus on other subjects, gaps in their background knowledge, or without providing any reasons.

The majority of Indian students were prepared for English lessons (85%), some provided negative responses (6.7%), some were not sure about the quality of their preparation (6.7%). One response clearly indicated misunderstanding: a student wrote about lacking “confidence to prepare English lessons” like a teacher, not about completing assignments as a student. Indian students wrote about the importance of English as a language of international communication, an opportunity to be successful in life, to travel, to be more confident at the lesson; they mentioned positive attitude to the subject, interactive tasks, reading more, watching videos in English, attempts to understand their teacher better. In particular, 22% of Indian students wrote about a positive influence of their teacher of English who “is a very good person”, “is teaching very well”, “effectively”, “does hard work” and prepares various activities for students, “teaches a language in a better way”; also mentioned his support and addressed him very formally (Sir, Mr.). At the same time, there were just a couple of positive comments of Ukrainian students directly referring to a teacher of English who “was great”, some comments were about lessons which were “effective and educational”. The differences could be explained by the influence of interpersonal factors such as status and position of the teacher, social distance in the cultures (Turula, 2010, p. 203).

Ukrainian students had plenty of suggestions on making English lessons more effective: nearly a third of suggestions on effectiveness of English lessons were about speaking and communication (with teachers and native speakers as well). Students also wrote about better textbooks, having more English lessons per week, and not at home, but at university; more challenging lessons, more interaction through different activities like Quizlet, Classtime, games, creative tasks like projects and presentations, more videos, practice, picking a partner for the whole term, educational programmes online, etc. The positive responses proved effectiveness of online tools such as Quizlet and Classtime which many teachers used during the quarantine (Saienکو & Chugai 2020, p.155). Not only extrinsic motivation was mentioned in the responses, but intrinsic as well: according to the responses, getting students interested was as important as efforts made by students themselves. These findings accord with earlier research on motivation as being a major issue studying online (Lusta, 2018). Some students were satisfied with “their English lessons as they were” and confessed they did not know which improvements to suggest.

Indian students suggested a lot of ways to improve lessons: a quarter of respondents were sure that communication, creative tasks, interactive tasks, visualisation, poems, drama, discussions, using animation, proverbs, playing games and having some fun could make lessons more effective. For nearly 6% of respondents preparation and revision were chosen, 6% of respondents opted for using technology as well; 5% of Indian students thought about the importance of the content, the same part about “teacher’s character and style of language”, “the way of teaching”; 3% of Indian students mentioned positive thinking; for some it was funding schools and self-study. Other ideas of Indian students included practising grammar, increasing vocabulary by reading authentic books and newspapers, learning more about the language, listening more often, “presenting oneself as an English speaker”, support from teachers and families.

Responding to the prompt about importance of getting grades by any means or learning something new, the majority of Ukrainian students (69%) indicated “learning something new” as more important than grades, 13% of students claimed both grades and learning were important for them, grades were more important for

9% of students. Ukrainian students mentioned in their comments that they learned because it was interesting, stated that learning something new was the main point. According to students, grades meant getting a scholarship, which was the main reason of trying to get as many points as possible.

Learning something new was more important than grades for 90% of Indian students. They provided the following comments: “it is more important”, “perfect for our life”, “exciting, important and good”, learning “meaning of new words” helps with understanding, getting “new information about new things”, getting knowledge in order “to shine and become successful”, “makes the study interesting”, ensures “a continuous development” of language skills. Indian students also indicated drawbacks of getting grades: “grades are not created in students’ mind”, “grades only for study but learning something new is different experience”; “anybody can get good marks, but learning something new is not possible for all”; “as we get the grade by any means then there is no adventures, no work of you”. Still, there was one argument for grades: “grades are important to know where we are in the competition”. The greatest disparity in results is seen in responses to prompt four: 90% of Indian students preferred learning something new to grades. Conversely, 69% of Ukrainian students chose learning something new.

Responding to the prompt about grouping, the majority of Ukrainian students chose working in groups as a preferable way of learning (34%), 13% of students chose working individually, 13% working in pairs. For 17% of students grouping did not matter. Answering question 5 about grouping, students had three choices, yet, they proposed their own variants or combined the suggested ones: 7% of students chose working in pairs or groups, 4% of students working in pairs or individually, 4% of students working in groups or individually. Altogether, 15% of students preferred various combinations of grouping. One response was improbable, student’s choice was “to be in English society, with real British or American people”, another response was humorous (with aliens). Choosing working individually, a student explained that only in this way “I know what I want to learn”. According to other responses, working in large groups is preferable because “speaking is trained better”, when students have difficulties with speaking “your group mates can help you”. Mini-groups or pairs were mentioned in another response as preferable, because “every learner has the opportunity to speak, listen, practice grammar and take part in discussion”. Some students indicated the optimal size of a group: 5-7 people, 4-8 people, or large groups. One response mentioned all kinds of grouping indicating that “the most effective is to work individually”, but in case of dialogues or joint projects “it is necessary to work in a group or pairs”.

The findings show that just over half of Indian students preferred working in groups (58%), 17% of students chose working individually, 12% of students chose working in pairs, and nearly 10% of students preferred various combinations of grouping. Those students who chose working in groups indicated that “group study makes (learning English) very interesting”; “other people in our group help us”; “we hear something new....also you know how to study”; “can share ideas with each other”; “discussion on every topic”, “understand all things well”; it is possible to compare different points of view; “like to work with friends or group members”, it helps with “speech, learning and also the group discussion” which students remember for a long time; “what we learn from friends is different” in a good way; “it is very joyful”. Proponents of working individually explained their choice by using two arguments: that they “take more efforts”, which meant they had nobody to help or do the job for them, and that it was their “personal credit”, they did not have to share points with others. Whereas approximately a third of Ukrainian students opted for working in groups (34%), over half of Indian students (58%) chose groups as their preferable way of working. These results are supported by other studies which show the effectiveness of using online groupwork (Chang, 2020, p. 115; Lukianenko & Vadaska, 2020, p. 68). Roughly the same number of Ukrainian and Indian students preferred working individually, in pairs, yet, more Ukrainian students than Indian ones chose various combinations of groupings.

The second survey covered technical, psychological, methodological aspects and issues related to assessment studying English online. In order to define what respondents believed about different aspects of online learning, a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD), and one open statement were used. We calculated the median (Mdn) and Inter-Quartile Range (IQR) of each item to find the central tendency and the spread of the responses.

Most Indian and Ukrainian students indicated agreement with the statement that they had their working space and necessary devices for studying online (Mdn=2, IQR=1) (see Table 1). The same positive attitude the respondents had about the Internet connection, but their opinions were more polarised (Mdn=2, IQR=2).

These results do not coincide with the results of other studies when students experienced power shortages, non-availability of gadgets or internet services, which could be explained by regional differences (Dogar et al., 2020, p. 19).

Table 1. The attitude of Indian (I) and Ukrainian (U) students towards studying English online

Survey	Country	SA (1)	A (2)	N (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	Mdn	IQR
1. I have my working space and devices for studying online	I	19	30	11	4	1	2	1
	U	26	26	5	2	0	2	1
2. The Internet connection is good enough to study online	I	19	22	10	10	4	2	2
	U	17	17	16	9	0	2	2
3. I feel safer online with my camera off	I	10	10	20	20	5	3	2
	U	24	16	19	0	0	2	2
4. It is easier for me to concentrate in a F2F class	I	30	15	12	5	3	2	2
	U	18	17	15	9	0	2	2
5. It is easier for me to study English online	I	15	28	8	10	4	2	1
	U	7	10	25	11	6	3	2
6. I think that a face-to-face lesson is more interactive than online	I	33	19	10	2	1	1	1
	U	13	24	13	6	3	2	1
7. Opportunities of group work are limited online	I	10	26	18	10	1	2	1
	U	7	21	16	13	2	3	1.5
8. For me online learning is developing self-directed learning skills	I	17	20	11	7	10	2	3
	U	10	31	9	6	3	2	1
9. I think assessment online is less rigorous than face-to-face	I	20	18	9	8	10	2	3
	U	9	19	25	3	3	3	1

Ukrainian students were more positive about feeling safer with their cameras turned off (Mdn=2, IQR=2), than Indian students, most of whom were indecisive (Mdn=3, IQR=2) (see Table 1). In fact, only some Ukrainian students turned their cameras on during videoconferences (English lessons), others kept their cameras off providing security or technical reasons. However, it was not a problem to keep their cameras on for Indian students.

The central tendency for most Indian and Ukrainian students was to agree with the statement that it was easier for them to concentrate in a face-to-face class than in an online class, but their opinions were quite polarised (Mdn=2, IQR=2). According to the responses of Indian students, it was easier for them to study English online (Mdn=2, IQR=1), while Ukrainian students were indecisive and their opinions were quite polarised (Mdn=3, IQR=2) (see Table 1).

All the respondents indicated agreement with the statement that face-to-face lessons were more interactive than online lessons, more Indian students expressed stronger agreement with that statement (Mdn=1, IQR=1), than Ukrainian students (Mdn=2, IQR=1). Moreover, compared with other statements, most Indian respondents strongly agreed with this statement (51%) (see Table 1). Typing in a chat instead of talking, inability to see facial expressions or body language of each other often cause misunderstanding and misinterpreting of the messages. These results are supported by other studies, which indicated a communication gap between all participants of online classes as well as the lack of community feeling caused by keeping the audios and videos off in order to reduce noise (Dogar et al., 2020, p. 17; Gokuladas & Baby Sam, 2020, p. 146).

More Indian students tended to agree with the statement about limited opportunities of online group work (Mdn=2, IQR=1) than Ukrainian students (Mdn=3, IQR=2). In fact, only some videoconferencing platforms allow organisers to create breakout rooms for group work, Zoom is one of them. Most respondents indicated agreement about developing self-directed learning skills while studying English online, but opinions of Indian students were more polarised (Mdn=2, IQR=3) than Ukrainian students' (Mdn=2, IQR=1) (see Table 1). Self-directed skills, which indicate some level of freedom and flexibility of students, are also mentioned as positive dimensions of online classes (Dogar et al., 2020, p. 21).

For most Indian students assessment online is less rigorous than face-to-face (Mdn=2, IQR=3), but the responses are scattered across the range, while Ukrainian students are indecisive about that issue (Mdn=3, IQR=1), their responses are clustered together (see Table 1). To be more student-friendly, assessment online should be conducted through portfolios, peer assessment, online tests, oral or written participation (Mukan & Lavrysh, 2020, p. 112).

All the responses are mostly clustered together in case of statements about working space, devices and interactivity of face-to-face classes (IQR=1). The most polarised are Indian students' opinions about online assessment and self-directed skills (IQR=3); moreover, compared with other statements, most Indian respondents strongly disagreed with these statements (15% each). Responding to the statements, Indian students chose at least one option out of five (SA, A, N, D, SD), while Ukrainian students did not opt for "strongly disagree" four times and for "disagree" one time (see Table 1).

Comparing and contrasting the responses to the open statement about the skills, which are better to develop online, we can see that Ukrainian students chose speaking (78%), reading (43%) and writing (51%), while Indian students opted for listening skills (78%) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Responses about the skills better developed online

Skills	Ukrainian		Indian		Difference
	Students	%	<i>Students</i>	%	
reading	43	72	26	40	+32
speaking	46	78	37	57	+21
writing	30	51	23	35	+16
listening	21	36	51	78	-42

The results partially differ from those obtained by other studies when students indicate reading, writing and listening as efficient online and excluded speaking, which could be explained by the fact that they used Moodle platform (Lukianenko, Vadaska, 2020, p. 67).

Limitations of the study

Though the study provided valuable data on Ukrainian and Indian students' experience of studying English online, which was affected by the quarantine, there were limitations to the study. More Indian than Ukrainian students participated in the study; the structure of the year was slightly different in two countries; the instructors used various methods, textbooks, supplementary materials, etc. Considering these limitations, the researchers plan another project designed more effectively.

Conclusions

Findings of the study showed that more than half of Ukrainian and Indian students wrote about their experience related to studying English online. However, while Ukrainian students concentrated on other subjects, Indian students wrote about life lessons in general. Both Ukrainian and Indian students mentioned the quarantine, distance learning and health issues in their responses. More Indian than Ukrainian students confirmed that they prepared for the English class, whereas the same number of students confessed that they

did not. Indian students also wrote more often about positive influence of their teacher. While nearly a third of Ukrainian students' suggestions on effectiveness of English lessons were about speaking and communication, Indian respondents also proposed preparation and revision. Indian students preferred learning something new to grades. Over half of Indian students and a third of Ukrainian students opted for working in groups. Roughly the same number of Ukrainian and Indian students preferred working individually, in pairs, yet, more Ukrainian students than Indian ones chose various combinations of groupings.

From the findings, we can see that most Indian and Ukrainian students indicated agreement with the statement that they had their working space, necessary devices and the Internet connection for studying online. Ukrainian students were more positive about feeling safer with their cameras turned off than Indian students, most of whom were indecisive. It was easier for most Indian and Ukrainian students to concentrate in a face-to-face class than in an online class, and Indian students expressed stronger agreement with the statement that face-to-face lessons were more interactive than online lessons, as well as with limited opportunities of online group work. However, Indian students were mostly positive about studying English online, while Ukrainian students were indecisive. Most respondents indicated agreement about developing self-directed learning skills while studying English online. For most Indian students assessment online is less rigorous than face-to-face, while Ukrainian students were indecisive about that issue. Comparing and contrasting the responses to the open statement about the skills to develop online, we can see that Ukrainian students chose speaking, reading and writing, while Indian students opted for listening skills. The findings of the research show that despite understanding the necessity of studying online, some students are reluctant to accept it fully. Moreover, there are some intercultural differences related to social distance in the cultures.

This study is not comprehensive as quarantine restrictions still affect higher education in many ways. Further investigations may be devoted to exploring online learning experience of students in Ukraine and India focusing on other issues.

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Received: December, 10, 2020

Accepted: March 1, 2021