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ONLINE EFL LEARNING IN UKRAINE: COMPARING SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS’ AND TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS

The transition to online EFL instruction in Ukraine, induced by wartime disruptions, has become a necessity. Yet, there is a limited understanding of how language teachers and learners perceive its effectiveness. This study, therefore, examined how secondary school learners and teachers in rural Ukraine assess the effectiveness, benefits, and shortcomings of online instruction, and whether the length of their respective experience influences their perceptions.

The study employed a quantitative survey design, eliciting data from 98 secondary school EFL learners and 22 teachers using an adapted questionnaire based on Zou et al. (2021). The data were analysed statistically through independent samples t-tests, chi-square tests, and simple linear regression. The results revealed that learners considered online EFL instruction as more effective than teachers did. While both groups expressed similar views concerning key advantages, such as flexibility, accessibility, and technology use, teachers were more inclined to endorse an immediate feedback. No statistically significant differences were found in the reported disadvantages, although teachers were more concerned about student engagement and interaction, whereas learners more often pointed to issues with the variety of instructional techniques. Notably, longer involvement with online instruction emerged as a significant predictor of more favourable effectiveness ratings, albeit modest. Overall, these findings underscore key role experience plays in shaping online learning and teaching attitudes while pointing to the need for meaningful experience and ongoing digital competence development for learners and teachers alike.

Key words: *distant/online learning, effectiveness, English as a foreign language, experience, virtual environment.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution sweeping across global educational systems has profoundly reshaped the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). In Ukraine, it was initially accelerated by the notorious pandemic and, more disruptively, by the full-scale military invasion. Both crises, but especially the latter, accelerated a rapid transition to virtual learning environments and the demand for technological competence among teachers and learners. Of all school subjects, perhaps English was among the most affected due to its communicative nature and heavy reliance on real-time interaction. Today, online learning has become a part and parcel of instruction at all educational levels. Yet, while much has been written in terms of the technological and pedagogical aspects of online education globally, research addressing Ukrainian EFL learners' and teachers' perspectives on its utility and challenges is comparatively scarce, underscoring the relevance of this inquiry [1]. The implementation of online education in Ukraine has often been reactive as teacher training and language instruction had to adapt under the pressure of time and resource constraints [16].

The objective of this study, therefore, is to investigate the perceived effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks of online EFL instruction and evaluate how much these views converge or diverge between the two stakeholder groups. It additionally probes for the influence of the time spent learning or teaching EFL online on the evaluation of its utility. The object of the study is online EFL instruction in the secondary education system in Ukraine. The subject is learners' and teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of online instruction, as well as the moderating role of prior experience.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Online learning is broadly defined as the use of digital technologies and computer-based systems to organize and implement instructional experiences [11]. Though used interchangeably with terms such as e-learning, remote learning, or virtual instruction, it is commonly understood to include the use of digital technologies, internet-based platforms, spatial separation, and synchronous vs. asynchronous modes of interaction [16; 21]. Its effective implementation is contingent on the quality of interactions, which has been found to directly affect learner engagement, satisfaction, and academic outcomes. Thus, to promote student engagement in virtual language classrooms, the literature emphasizes the need for varied, learner-sensitized interaction strategies [29; 30]. Though language teachers have begun to incorporate virtual tools like whiteboards, breakout rooms, and collaborative apps to stimulate classroom interaction, their successful implementation requires prior pedagogical training, institutional support, and readiness on students' part or motivation [8; 20; 27].

Several studies have looked into the effectiveness and potential pitfalls of online learning, yielding rather mixed findings [3]. Although many of these have uncovered the utility of the virtual teaching mode and the overall positive attitude held by both learners and educators, several papers still note that it falls short of traditional in-classroom instruction [6; 8]. The typically cited advantages include flexible scheduling, deeper information processing and knowledge assimilation, student-centeredness, and the use of multimedia resources [4; 17]. Additionally, online learning enables personalized learning, learner autonomy, and exposure to authentic language input [5; 21]. Providing online lessons are thoroughly planned and scaffolded, interactive tools like apps or breakout rooms further contribute to learner engagement. Hubbard pointed out that the application of online technologies can also raise learner motivation and instructional efficiency [12].

Among the pitfalls of online learning, the literature notes reduced opportunities for speaking practice, limited interaction [3; 20; 30], decrease in learner motivation and engagement [3; 8], technological barriers [8], difficulties in adapting materials [20], a lack of personalized feedback in large classes, as well as challenges in assessment and feedback [2]. Moreover, teachers and students experience exhaustion from extended time spent in digital environments [8]. Institutional disparities were also shown to impact the utility of online education. Specifically, in Ukraine, Lukina [1] found that learners from rural or under-resourced territories encountered problems with internet connectivity and a shortage of digital devices indispensable for online learning. In addition, many teachers of an older generation lacked the requisite technological competence. In recent years, the challenges were only further exacerbated by displacement, emotional strain, and power outages [16].

Recent comparative studies have documented that while learners value flexibility, usability, and convenience offered by online learning [8; 10], teachers, on the contrary, tend to approach it more cautiously raising concerns about its effectiveness, reduced learner engagement, and issues with classroom control [2; 20; 24]. Thus, according to Rapanta et al. [20], university students were generally more optimistic and satisfied with online learning than instructors, mainly caused by issues with pedagogical effectiveness and the lack of real-time interaction. Teachers reported experiencing difficulties with student engagement, adapting teaching methods, and maintaining interactions. They also feared that online teaching could compromise the quality of instruction as their competence needed for online instruction was not on par with the traditional face-to-face mode. However, both noted that the loss of real-time interaction and social aspects of classroom interactions was an issue.

Similarly, Trust and Whalen [27] observed that learners appreciated greater autonomy in managing

their own learning offered by the virtual environment, including asynchronous access to course materials, flexible study schedules, and the opportunity to revisit the recorded lessons and materials at their own pace. In parallel, teachers were concerned about monitoring student progress and providing feedback effectively. They also experienced challenges engaging students remotely, managing participation, and assessing understanding.

Research consistently shows that learners focus on the convenience and flexibility of online learning, as it allows them to balance personal and academic responsibilities. Thus, Buglass et al. [6], in their UK-based study, demonstrated that learners appreciated working at their own pace, revisiting lecture recordings, and managing learning with other commitments. Even so, many experienced feelings of isolation, struggled to maintain motivation, and participate actively in synchronous sessions. Contrary to this, many teachers feel being insufficiently trained for remote instruction and experienced challenges associated with online assessment, progress monitoring, student engagement, and technology malfunctions [19; 28].

In sum, while the literature recognizes the benefits and caveats of online EFL learning [3], there is a dearth of studies uncovering how language teachers and learners evaluate this modality in conflict-affected areas as Ukraine, where it sometimes remains the only feasible mode of instruction. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: To what extent do learners and teachers differ in their perceptions of the effectiveness of online EFL instruction?

RQ2: What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online EFL instruction?

RQ3: Does experience with online learning or teaching influence perceptions of its effectiveness?

3. METHOD

Participants

The study involved a total of 120 participants from secondary schools located in rural areas of Western Ukraine, where a hybrid model of online and offline EFL instruction is currently implemented. The sample, recruited through a convenience sampling technique, included 98 secondary school learners (aged 15 to 17) and 22 EFL teachers. All of them had from 1 to more than 5 years of experience with online language instruction, gained before and during the ongoing war. Both participant groups came from the same regional educational context, which allowed for a comparison of learners' and teachers' perspectives on EFL instruction.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected using an adapted questionnaire developed by Zou et al. [30], who evaluated language teachers' and students' understanding of the effectiveness of online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The instrument's first section gathered

demographic data, including the participants' role in education (student or teacher), educational level, the main platforms used for instruction, and years of experience with online teaching or learning. The data on participants' experience with online EFL teaching and learning were collected using an ordinal scale with the following categories: less than 1 year, 1-3 years, 3-5 years, and more than 5 years.

The main section of the instrument probed for learners' and teachers' views on the effectiveness of online EFL instruction according to Hubbard's [12] Eight Principles across instructional efficiency, interactivity, engagement, and access. The responses were collected on a four-point Likert scale [14], from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. For cross-group comparison, we maintained the items parallel. The third section collected information about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online learning. The list of items was developed following an extensive literature review. Among the benefits were flexibility, accessibility, diverse learning resources, personalized learning, technology use, immediate feedback, interactions, and cost-effectiveness. The disadvantages comprised issues with interaction, engagement, self-discipline, feedback, speaking practice, technology, and a variety of activities. The items in this section were coded dichotomously in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS): 0 – not selected, 1 – selected).

First, an independent samples t-test [26] was performed to examine whether learners and teachers differ in their perceptions of the effectiveness of online EFL instruction. Following it, perceived advantages and challenges of online learning were analyzed comparatively through chi-square tests of independence [23] and, where appropriate, Fisher's exact test [24]. Finally, to examine whether online learning or teaching experience predicts perceived effectiveness, a simple linear regression was conducted. All analyses were carried out using the SPSS (Version 23) software package.

The quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire. Class teachers assisted learners in completing the questionnaire to ensure clarity of the items and full participation. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifying information was elicited.

4. RESULTS

To compare learners' and teachers' views about the effectiveness of online instruction, an independent samples t-test was performed (Table 1).

Findings from descriptive statistics revealed that school learners reported higher level of perceived effectiveness ($M=4.05$, $SD=.92$) than their teachers ($M=3.0$, $SD=.94$). To test the assumption of homogeneity of variances, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances [13] was conducted, yielding a non-significant result ($F(1,120) = .52$, $p=.47$). Consequently, the two group's

variances were statistically equal. The t-test for equality of means produced a statistically significant difference between the two groups: $t(120) = 3.4$, $p = .001$. The observed mean difference constituted 1.05, indicating that learners perceived online EFL learning as more effective than teachers did. An alternative test assuming unequal variances yielded similar results. Thus, it can be concluded that the role (teacher vs. learner) significantly impacts views about the utility of online language instruction, with students being more supportive of this mode.

The results of comparison of learners' and teachers' views about the advantages of online EFL learning produced by the chi-square tests and Fisher's exact tests are shown in Table 2.

Overall, the most frequently related advantages were flexibility, accessibility, and technology use with both groups indicating comparable endorsement levels. Among all variables, only one item reached a statistically significant level of difference. Specifically, teachers were more likely to view *Immediate feedback* as an advantage, $\chi^2 = 4.91$, $p = .027$, Fisher's Exact $p = .03$.

Table 3 presents the findings of a series of chi-square tests of independence conducted to compare learners' and teachers' views about the disadvantages of online learning.

As shown in Table 3, none of the observed differences between learners and teachers was statistically significant ($p > .05$). Nevertheless, teachers emphasized lack of interaction, low student engagement, and lack of self-discipline as notable challenges, suggesting that they are more concerned with reduced learning and interpersonal engagement in virtual settings. Conversely, learners expressed greater concern for technical issues and limited activities. Overall, the findings reveal that both groups share similar views in terms of the challenges of online learning.

To determine whether years spent teaching or learning English in virtual settings predicted perceived effectiveness, a simple linear regression was run (Table 4).

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1,118) = 6.23$, $p = .025$, thus experience resulted in a more favorable perception of the effectiveness of online instruction. The given model accounted for about 6% of the variance in perceptions, $R^2 = .06$. Based on the unstandardized regression coefficient of $B = .27$ ($SE = .12$), it can be seen that for each unit increase in experience (e.g., from 1-3 to 3-5 years), effectiveness increased by approximately .27 points. There is a positive relationship, however small, between participants' experience with online EFL instruction and their evaluation of its utility.

Discussion

In terms of the first research question, the analysis revealed that learners evaluated online EFL learning as more effective than instructors. This was predictable, with earlier research indicating that students often considered it more favorably, possibly due to their

familiarity with digital tools and greater flexibility [18; 22]. Teachers' more reserved evaluation may reflect their concerns with instructional quality or issues with student engagement in a virtual environment. Nevertheless, the overall positive means in both groups show that they consider online instruction a viable alternative or if needed, a supplement to traditional face-to-face modality.

The comparison of students' and teachers' perceptions of the advantages and caveats of online instruction failed to produce statistically significant differences. The participants in this study held largely comparable views concerning the above dichotomy. Both groups endorsed flexibility, accessibility, and use of technologies offered by the virtual environment. Interestingly, only immediate feedback showed statistical significance among all comparisons, with teachers more likely to acknowledge it as a benefit. These results align with earlier research, which also highlighted convenience, self-paced learning, and access as the major appeals of online instruction [3; 27].

Regarding disadvantages, teachers expressed concern about limited interaction, reduced student engagement, and the necessity for self-discipline. This also reprises previous research reporting teachers' reservations in terms of learner involvement and instructional control in online settings [16; 20]. Learners, by contrast, more frequently mentioned limited activity types and technical problems than teachers. Even so, the overall response pattern shows that both stakeholder groups are unanimous about the affordances and challenges of online language teaching.

With respect to the third research question, the results of the regression analysis demonstrated a modest positive relationship between participants' duration of experience with online EFL learning and teaching and their perceived effectiveness of this instructional modality. Hence, the length of exposure appears to impact participants' evaluation of the online environment. These findings replicate existing evidence where familiarity and accumulated experience with digital tools led to enhanced self-efficacy beliefs and overall satisfaction with online learning [7; 9; 22]. Thus, Cook & Thompson found that prior experience and satisfaction with online learning were associated with learning gains, even more so than the comfort with technology per se. The researchers concluded that actual engagement and familiarity with online instruction, rather than technical proficiency alone, predict how far learners endorse it [9]. Additional support comes from Rodrigues et al. who evinced that online experience and, especially its quality, were associated with satisfaction, motivation, and comfort with technology expressed by students. Contrastingly, students lacking such experience did not demonstrate the like associations [22]. Consequently, experiential familiarity played a mediating role in affecting learners' assessment of the quality and

Table 1

Perceived effectiveness of online EFL instruction between learners and teachers

Effectiveness	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
Equal variances assumed	.52	.47	3.40	120	.001	1.05	.31	.44 1.67

Table 2

Perceived advantages of online EFL learning

Advantage	Students %	Teachers %	χ^2 (p-value)	p (Exact 2-sided)
Use of Technology	59.5	60.3	0.01(.98)	1.00
Flexibility	78.8	70.5	1.91(.17)	.19
Accessibility	59.0	47.4	1.03(.31)	.34
Diverse Learning Resources	44.3	52.0	.12(.73)	.75
Personalized Learning	30.4	40.0	.38(.54)	.72
Immediate Feedback	34.2	57.2	4.9(.03)	.03
Interaction	49.4	41.5	1.51(.22)	.32
Cost-Effectiveness	28.9	31.7	.014 (.91)	1.00

Table 3

Students' vs. teachers' views of disadvantages of online learning

Disadvantage	Students %	Teachers %	χ^2 (df=1)	p (Exact, 2-sided)
Lack of interaction	49.4%	70.1%	1.51(.22)	.32
Limited speaking practice	34.2%	40.8%	.13(.72)	.73
Technical issues	58.2%	40.6%	1.20(.27)	.32
Low student engagement	39.2%	54.0%	.41(.56)	.48
Distractions at home	44.3%	50.2%	.12(.73)	.75
Less feedback from teachers	17.7%	10.2%	.38(.54)	.72
Lack of self-discipline	32.9%	50.7%	1.14(.29)	.31
Limited types of activities	22.8%	11.0%	2.16(.09)	.20

Table 4

Simple linear regression predicting perceived effectiveness from online experience

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2	F	df
Experience with online English learning/teaching	.27	.12	.24	2.29	.025	.06	6.23	1, 118

Note. Dependent variable: Perceived effectiveness of online English learning. R^2 indicates proportion of variance explained by the model. Regression model was statistically significant at $p < .05$.

ANOVAa

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	6.23	1	6.23	6.23	.025
Residual	106.37	118	.90		
Total	112.80	119			

a. Dependent Variable: Effectiveness

b. Predictors: (Constant), How much experience do you have with learning/teaching English online?

value of online instruction. More recently, based on a regression analysis, Çakmakkaya et al. showcased that online learning satisfaction was influenced by several experience-related factors [7]. Among these were familiarity with digital online techniques, teachers' digital competence level, interactive instructional approaches, and having a dedicated workspace. Hence, it is not only duration but also quality and context that enhance learners' perception of the effectiveness of distant learning. Taken together, increasing familiarity with online learning tools and instructional approaches appears to contribute to more favorable views. However, given the modest effect size obtained in the present study, the participants' attitudes towards online instruction may also vary due to the quality of experience or the teaching approaches adopted in online settings.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine the perceptions of secondary school learners and teachers regarding online EFL learning in Ukraine, a modality that has become prevalent due to the exigencies of wartime conditions. The findings elucidate that learners generally held more favorable views of online EFL learning than teachers, particularly in terms of its overall effectiveness. Additionally, while both groups acknowledged common

advantages such as flexibility, accessibility, and the integration of technology, teachers were more likely to highlight immediate feedback as a key benefit. Perceived challenges showed more convergence between the two groups. However, teachers more often voiced concerns about diminished interaction, learner engagement, and the need for learner self-discipline. Contrastingly, learners most frequently cited the limited variety of activities as a key challenge. A notable outcome of the study was that longer experience with online learning or teaching modestly predicted a favorable evaluation of its effectiveness. Hence, familiarity with the digital environment and self-efficacy may enhance learners' and teachers' overall satisfaction. Thus, these findings reinforce the value of experience: integrating digital elements into regular instruction can scaffold the development of the underlying skills and positive attitudes among learners and teachers alike.

Nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The number of teacher and learner participants was small, and the sample was confined to rural schools in one region of Ukraine, which may affect the study's generalizability. Moreover, the self-reported data could introduce a response bias. Future studies could expand on these findings by incorporating more diverse and larger samples, eliciting not only quantitative but also qualitative data.

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ДИСТАНЦІЙНЕ НАВЧАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ В СЕРЕДНІХ ШКОЛАХ УКРАЇНИ: ПОРІВНЯЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ПОГЛЯДІВ УЧНІВ ТА ВЧИТЕЛІВ

Цифровізація української шкільної системи, що посилилася внаслідок збройної агресії, прискорила необхідність переходу іншомовної освіти, зокрема викладання англійської мови як іноземної, у віртуальне середовище. За таких умов особливої актуальності набуває вивчення ставлення учасників освітнього процесу до дистанційного навчання. Відтак метою дослідження є з'ясування поглядів учнів і вчителів англійської мови як іноземної щодо ефективності, переваг і недоліків дистанційного навчання. Додатково проаналізовано вплив досвіду навчання або викладання у віртуальному форматі на сприйняття його ефективності.

Дослідження виконувалося засобами анкетування та статистичної обробки даних, одержаних за участь 120 респондентів: 98 учнів старших класів середніх шкіл та 22 вчителів шкіл, розташованих у сільській місцевості Західної України, де впроваджується змішана форма навчання. Застосовано адаптований опитувальник Zou та ін. (2021), що містить шкалу оцінки ефективності навчального процесу організованого у віртуальному середовищі, а також шкалу виявлення його переваг і недоліків.

Для обробки емпіричних даних використано t-критерій Стьюдента, критерій χ^2 та метод лінійної регресії. Виявлено, що учні оцінюють якість онлайн-навчання значно вище, ніж вчителі. Обидві групи респондентів поділяють думку стосовно таких переваг, як гнучкість, доступність та технологічність, водночас педагоги більш скильні розглядати миттєвий зворотній зв'язок як важому перевагу віртуального навчання. Розбіжностей у сприйнятті труднощів дистанційного навчання виявлено не було, проте вчителі наголошують на складнощах у забезпечені взаємодії та залученні учнів до навчального процесу, тоді як учні вказують на обмеженість навчальних методів і технік. Регресійний аналіз виявив незначний, але статистично значущий вплив досвіду онлайн-навчання на оцінку його ефективності.

Ключові слова: англійська мова як іноземна, віртуальне середовище, дистанційне навчання, ефективність навчання, досвід.

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