



## Zoom-based Distance Learning of English as a Foreign Language

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### Abstract

The focus of the present study is Zoom-based distance learning of English as a foreign language. The relevance of the issue is caused by a tendency to implement distance learning into the educational process. The objective of this paper is to investigate students' and teachers' attitudes to Zoom-based distance learning, to examine its main advantages and disadvantages, to formulate didactic principles for its organization. The present research is based on the theoretical and empirical methods: analysis of studies on distance learning, observation, interviewing, and survey methods. The participants for this study were 72 students of the Kazan Federal University and 20 teachers of EFL. According to the conducted research, the students indicated such benefits of the Zoom platform as simplicity of installation, high quality of audio and video, the absence of connection drop-out. The results of a sociological study also show that the students' attendance percentage of Zoom-based lessons is higher than the attendance of the traditional lessons.

**Keywords:** Distance Learning; Zoom; Foreign Language Teaching; Educational Process; Digitalization.

### 1. Introduction

The process of digitalization and computerization is reflected in many human activities, including education too. Digitalization has brought a new form of education – distance learning. The terms distance learning, e-learning, online learning, digital learning, and virtual learning are all synonyms to describe an education based on electronic tools and media through the Internet and network technologies (Ghazal, Samsudin, & Aldowah, 2015). The essential elements of distance learning are the technological infrastructure, e-learning platform, e-learning content, participants (Devedžić, 2006).

The communication in distance learning can be integrated by two different methods, synchronous and asynchronous. In the synchronic type, the teacher and student communicate at the same time despite different locations. There are two necessary components of synchronic type: interactions and time. Khan defines synchronous type as the interaction of participants with an instructor via the Internet in real-time (Khan, 2006). The asynchronous type of distance learning does not require the teacher and student to communicate simultaneously. In this type of distance learning, the teacher posts the content in advance; then students can engage in web-based lessons at their own pace whenever they need it (Rosen, 2009). Mayadas defines asynchronous type as “an interactive learning community that is not limited by time, place, or the constraints of a classroom” (Mayadas, 1997). The environment in synchronous distance learning is closer to the traditional class because it allows the teachers and students to establish audio and video communication through different technical tools (Ennsner-Kananen, Escobar, & Bigelow, 2017).

The two main aspects of distance learning are pedagogical and technological (Devedžić, 2006). The pedagogical aspect concerns the e-learning content; the technological aspect includes e-learning tools that should deliver e-learning content to the students (Yuliya YurISOVna & RafISOVna Alikberova, 2019; ZabiROVna Khabibullina, MazitOVna Akhmedova, Vladislavovich Makletsov, EmitOVna Khairullina, & Ajgul RaisOVna, 2019). There are tools for synchronous



and asynchronous distant learning. Tools for asynchronous learning include reading materials, audio, and video. The synchronous tools include virtual classrooms, webinars, video conferencing.

Video conferencing is more effective compared to other distance learning tools in terms of real-time interaction, relationships, and motivation (Chen, Dobinson, & Kent, 2020; Correia, Liu, & Xu, 2020; Markova, Glazkova, & Zaborova, 2017; Riedling, 2020; Xiong, Ge, Wang, & Wang, 2017). Ritzel defines video conferencing as “an active tool that incorporates audio, video, computing, and communications technologies to allow people from different locations to collaborate face-to-face in real-time, and share all types of information including data, documents, sounds, and pictures” (Maitra, 2017; Ritzel, 2010). The effectiveness of video conferencing in distance learning depends on institutional, contextual factors, and the attitudes of students and teachers. Video conferencing saves time and reduces the cost of education by connecting teachers and students in different places. It forms a connected environment between students and creates a feeling of togetherness (Farzadnia & Giles, 2015).

Nowadays, there are several applications offering video web conferencing in distance learning. Skype and Zoom are leaders among them. Skype is free software for communication that permits students to perform calls, video conferencing online, and send messages. Despite the advantages, some researchers discuss difficulties with the use of Skype in distance learning (Seitz, 2016; Weller, 2015). Typical problems are dropped calls and pauses, low quality of audio or video, inconsistent and delayed connectivity (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

Zoom is a cloud-based video web conferencing application. It offers web conferencing, online meetings for up to 1000 video participants and 10000 viewers, group messaging services, and recording of sessions. Its main features are HD video and HD voice, group messaging, full-screen view, simultaneous screen sharing, Breakout Rooms, whiteboarding. Zoom is simple to use and has an intuitive user-interface. Besides, Zoom video conferencing is stable and supports long video calls.

## 2. Literature Review

Various researches have been done on the subject of this article. Research about distance language education courses in general focuses mainly on the effectiveness of teaching language skills, technological aspects in language teaching, and autonomous learning. For instance, Solé & Hopkins (2007) contrast two approaches to distance language learning on the basis of providing practice in four language skills, designing appropriate assessment strategies, and learners' contribution to the educational context. They analyze distance educational philosophies of two universities clarifying some similarities and differences. They conclude that each university provide learners with good quality language courses, however, the writers point out that institutions wishing to carry out distance language courses need to reconsider their medium and long-term consequences about technology. Similarly, Lambert (1991) mentions the lack of innovative development in distance language courses and states that individual language learning needs remain unmet. He maintains that in order to compensate for these disadvantages, upper-level skill instruction should be attached importance, more flexible modules must be produced, and less commonly taught courses must be included in the distance education programs. In another study, White (2006) presents a critical overview of the distance language teaching and learning field. She states that distance language learning is conceptualized as the development of technology-mediated language learning opportunities. She maintains that there is a shift from the delivery of the content to facilitating transactions between, learners, teachers, and native speakers. She emphasizes the importance of independent learner concept, but this is also replaced by collaborative learning community through distance education. According to Sampson (2003) distance learning referred mainly to students' independent learning at a distance, developed through the means of self-study texts, non-contiguous communication, and not controlled by the teacher. Keegan (1996) defined distance learning by identifying five main elements: the separation of teacher and learner; the influence of an educational organization; the use of technical media (usually print) to unite the teacher and learner and to carry educational content; the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

Holmberg (1986) explained how “distance education includes the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization”. (Z. Berge, 1995; Z. L. Berge & Collins, 1995) stated that the qualities of a web-based teacher are: written presentation skills,



technical competencies, virtual management techniques, and the ability to engage students in virtual communication. Wallace (2003) described what people believe are obvious tasks for the web-based teacher: designing the course materials, interacting with students, giving feedback and assessing students' work. She explained that tasks such as class discussions, small group activities and lectures may not be so obvious in the web-based environment, but they were necessary in the teaching process. Z. Berge (1995) and Mason (1991) agreed on three basic roles for teachers in a web-based environment. Organizational: refers to what the teacher should do in order to manage logistics of the course such as instructional procedures for registration, dates of assignments and tests, deadlines for tasks, and so forth. Social: encompasses interaction and communication. Pedagogical or intellectual: relates to create ways for delivering the course content and supporting students' learning.

Moran (1997) says: There are currently two types of education, namely the presence, also conventional call, to be used for centuries and distance, more recent, but has increased its acceptance every day. Distance education, known acronym to call this type of education is the way of learning which is established by the use of technologies that allow interaction between the student and the teacher, although they are in physical environments and different timelines. According to an article published in *The Journal*, a North American journal specialized in education, the distance education appeared in the year 1840, year in which Sir Isaac Pitman had the idea of creating professional shorthand writing courses by correspondence. The concept was so successful that within a few years the education programs were already available in the UK, Germany, USA and Japan. In 1900, the first education department by correspondence appeared at the

University of Chicago, and in 1911 it appeared in Australia, at the University of Queensland, in the Department of Foreign Studies. At the end of the 70s, the Open University, located in the UK, has initiated a development phase in distance education, which sent studying materials to its students, such as texts and audio and video, but also completed the study of radio and television broadcasts. In addition, tutors had telephone sessions with their students in order to ensure quality learning. Over the next two decades, the Open University has already had four open universities in Europe and more than 20 around the world.

### 3. Methods

The objective of this study is to investigate students' and teachers' attitudes to Zoom-based distance learning to examine and describe the main advantages and disadvantages of Zoom video conferencing, to formulate didactic principles for the organization of distant learning lessons.

The present research is based on the theoretical and empirical methods: analysis of studies on cloud-based video web conferencing applications and platforms; observation, interviewing, and survey methods.

The participants for the present study were 72 students of the Kazan Federal University and 20 teachers of English as a foreign language.

#### 3.1. The study included three stages

The term distance learning represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place. It offers flexible learning opportunities to individual and group learners. This is the most rapidly growing segment of education. The potential impact of distance learning on all education has been emphasized by the development of Internet-based technologies, particularly the World Wide Web. It can be described as learning involving implementation of information, computing and communications technology applications in more than one location (Webster & Hackley, 1997). The basic definition of distance learning considers that the teacher and the students are separate in the spatial dimension and that this distance is filled by using technological resources (Casarotti, Filipponi, Pieti, & Sartori, 2002).

The use of technology to aid in the processing and communication of information is not new; it is at least as old as writing. However, over the last 50 years, the development of a range of technologies has accelerated exponentially, mainly due to the invention of digital electronics. The available methods of learning used in distance learning are divided into two basic groups: synchronous and asynchronous learning. The term synchronous learning is a mode of delivery where all participants are present at the same time. It resembles traditional classroom teaching methods despite the

participants being located remotely. It requires a timetable to be organized. The asynchronous learning mode of delivery is where participants access course materials on their own schedule and so is more flexible. Students are not required to be together at the same time. The two methods can be combined in order to deliver one course. The use of resources and technologies of the Internet is very important as it increases education accessibility. Taking the huge scale of the Internet into account, the creation of mechanisms designed for effective navigation of the Internet, and the collection, analysis, exchange and distribution of information for the specific use of education acquires great importance (UNESCO, 2010). Various Internet technologies are used for the solution of various educational tasks, namely, teaching, learning and management of the educational process. The richness of modern Internet, Web and multimedia technologies allows for unlimited creativity when it comes to electronic courseware development. Such characteristic offers new opportunities to create very interesting course material while representing a substantial challenge for the educator for its requirement to rethink the course content in the light of new technologies.

At the first stage, the analysis of the literature and papers was carried out, the objective and methods were singled out, the plan of the present study was made.

In the second stage, distance learning of 72 students was organized. They were divided into four groups and were taught English as a foreign language. The students were enrolled in distance learning on the basis of cloud-based video web conferencing application Zoom. The distance learning course lasted six weeks. Lessons for each group of students were online twice per week for an hour and a half. At this stage, class attendance was also examined.

In the third stage, a survey of 72 students was conducted. They were interviewed about their attitude to the Zoom based distance learning. A survey was conducted two times: before taking distance learning courses and after six weeks of it.

At the fourth stage of our research, we conducted a survey of 20 teachers of English as a foreign language who also used Zoom as a platform for distance learning for two months. The results of the survey were analyzed and summarized.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Distance education is a form of education in which the participants in educational process teacher and learners are physically separated and communicate by different means and at different times. From this definition we can differentiate the main characteristics of distance education:

- Separation of teacher and learners in space and time;
- Use of different media to realize the interaction among teacher, learners and educational content;
- The provision of two-way communication between teacher and learners;
- Control of the learning process by the learners rather than the teacher.

Distance education becomes more and more prevalent in contemporary society. It is an integral part of education regardless of its form and technologies used. In the center of the intention of the teachers are the necessities of the students and their specific features. Many various approaches for presenting the learning content and technologies for delivering it to students exist. They are subsidiary means for education and can increase its effectiveness. Distance education courses are effective when they are carefully planned in consideration with students' needs and profile. The learning content should be designed to be useful to them. The appropriate technologies for implementation of distance education courses are selected after that. The teachers' efforts should be turned to overcoming the existing risk of shifting the emphasis from the essence of the learning content to the technologies for its presentation and delivering (Kiryakova, 2009).

One of the earliest attempts was advertised in 1728. This was in the Boston Gazette for "Caleb Philipps, Teacher of the new method of Short Hand", who sought students who wanted to learn through weekly mailed lessons (Börje Holmberg, Bernath, & Busch, 2005). The first distance education course in the modern sense was provided by Sir Isaac Pitman in the 1840s, who taught a system of shorthand by mailing texts transcribed into shorthand on postcards and receiving transcriptions from his students in return for correction. The element of student feedback was a crucial innovation in Pitman's system (Tait, 2003). This scheme was made possible by the introduction of uniform postage rates across England in 1840. This early beginning proved extremely successful, and the Phonographic Correspondence Society was founded three years later to establish these courses on a more formal basis. The Society paved the way for the later

formation of Sir Isaac Pitman Colleges across the country (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). The first correspondence school in the United States was the Society to Encourage Studies at Home, which was founded in 1873 (Cole, 2012).

After six weeks of students' distance learning, we conducted research. Firstly, we examined class attendance because it is an essential component of quality education. We analyzed the percentage of students' attendance at Zoom based distance learning lessons. Then we compared it with these students' attendance of traditional lessons before taking distance learning (Figure 1).

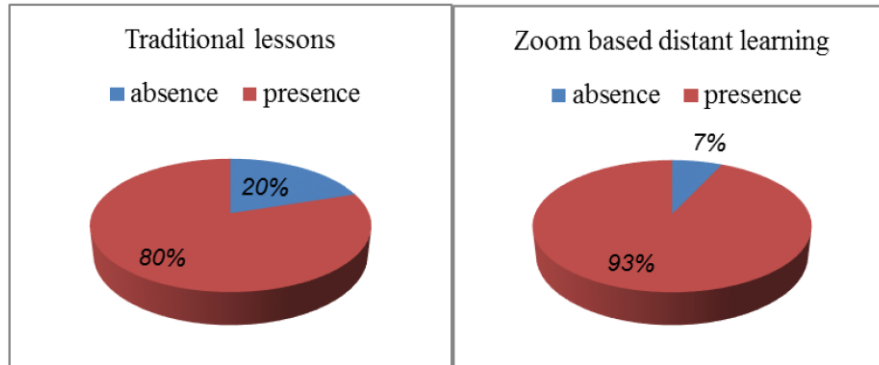


Figure 1. Evidence of students' presences and absences

The figure 1 shows that the students' attendance percentage in Zoom based distance learning is higher than the attendance of the traditional lessons. 7% of the students were absent in distance learning, while in traditional lessons, 20% of them were absent. It is easy to explain: it's more convenient to attend distance learning lessons compared to traditional ones because students do not waste time to reach the university.

At the next stage of our research, we conducted a survey of these students concerning their attitude to the Zoom. A survey was conducted two times: before taking Zoom based distance learning course and after six weeks of distance learning. The results are shown below (Figure 2).

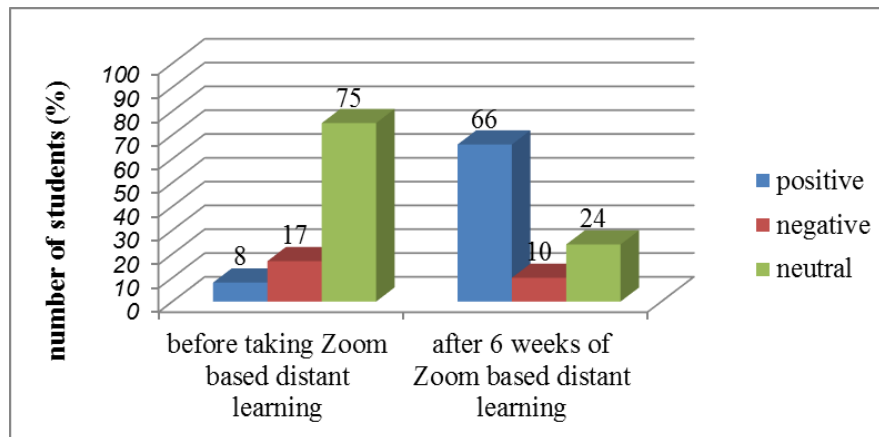


Figure 2. Indicators of students' attitude.

Figure 2 shows that before taking Zoom based distance learning lessons, students had mainly neutral feelings (75 %) about Zoom based lessons. This is primarily due to the fact that this percent of students did not have any experience in distance learning, or they were indifferent to it. 33% of students were negative. They had already used distance learning before (more often Skype-based), and they had negative feelings about it because there was a frequently dropped connection, low quality of audio and sound. These students expected to have the same problems with Zoom.

After six weeks of Zoom based distant learning, the same students were surveyed. Figure 1 shows that the percent of students with a positive attitude has considerably increased.

The students indicated a simplicity of installation, high quality of audio and video, the absence of connection drop-out as the main advantages of Zoom compared to other video conferencing platforms such as Skype. Also, they mentioned the intuitive functionality of Zoom.

Despite the generally positive feelings about using Zoom, some students had difficulty in joining the session; the most common problem was connected with microphone functionality. Some students pointed out that they get more tired compared to traditional lessons.

Furthermore, we surveyed 20 teachers having used Zoom as a platform for distance learning. They taught English as a foreign language and experienced Zoom for two months. The teachers noted that it was initially difficult to adapt to distance learning: they felt tightness and tension in front of the camera; also, they had to review traditional teaching methods. However, after 2-3 lessons, teachers began to feel comfortable and confident themselves. We examined the teachers' attitude to Zoom based distance learning (Figure 3).

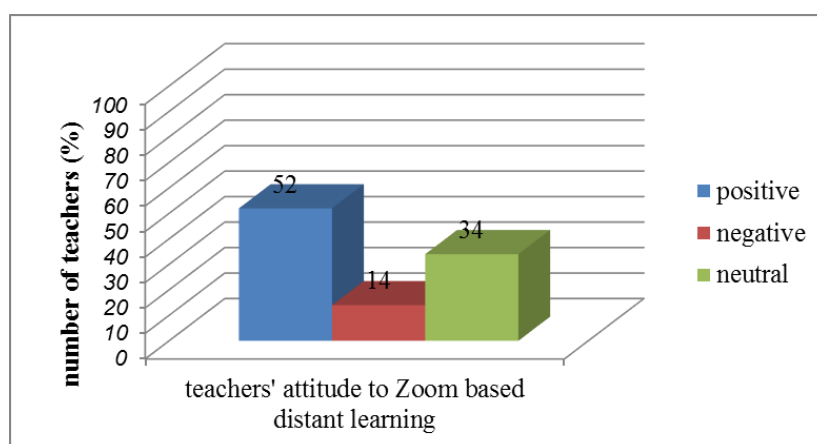


Figure 3. Indicators of teachers' attitudes.

According to Figure 3, 52% of teachers had positive feelings to Zoom, 34% were neutral.

Comparing to other video web conferencing applications, the teachers suggested that Zoom is better suited to distance learning than alternative platforms such as Skype because the connection is reliable, the quality of video and audio is excellent, more available tools. Simultaneous screen share, virtual background, active speaker view, desktop and application sharing, private and group chat, the option "Raise hand," breakout rooms were mentioned as one of the Zoom advantages.

At the same time, the teachers pointed out some disadvantages. Preparation for distance learning lessons takes more time than traditional lessons; moreover, they spend more time checking home tasks. Also, it is impossible to identify definitely the authority of materials sent by students to check. This can lead to a false assessment of students' performance. Some teachers noted organizational difficulties, such as limited opportunity to influence discipline during the distance lesson, difficulties in holding the full attention of the virtual audience for an hour and a half.

Besides, the teachers indicated the lack of students' initiative in distance learning. During discussions, many students keep silent or respond to the teacher's questions, usually using single words such as "yes" or "no". Most students did not attempt to ask questions or additional information when misunderstanding happened. They are indifferent and disinterested. When the teacher asked one student, the others switched off their microphones and ignored that communication. The lack of students' initiative and motivation harms the quality of education. Teachers should have the ability to encourage and direct students; manage interactions between them, to enhance their motivation.

We formulated some didactic principles for the organization of Zoom based distant learning:

1. It is very critical to enhance students' and teachers' digital literacy.

Lessons should definitely be taught at the same time every week, according to the schedule.

It is necessary to draw attention to the methodical supply: the students should be prepared to the comprehension of new material. To achieve this the teacher can suggest students to read in advance relevant section of the textbook or he can send students appropriate materials on the topic of next lesson. Despite the distance all educational, organizational and ethical rules should be followed: the teacher controls lessons' attendance, the presence of students is obligatory; during the distance lesson students are not allowed to lie in bed, eat, do something else not relating to the lesson, they shouldn't sit in pajamas. Laptops, computers are more preferable for distant learning than mobile phones.

During distance lessons, it is difficult for teachers to hold students' attention. Therefore, lessons should be added with images, presentations, and Illustrative materials, which activate students' attention and motivate them.

Zoom based distance learning requires a special interactive approach. All participants in the lesson are expected to interact. The teacher should feel his audience and also try to get students' feedback.

At the end of the lesson, it is preferable to give students' home tasks.

All the above-mentioned recommendations aim to enhance the quality of distance learning, and hence to improve English language skills.

Among the numerous advantages brought by distance education to students who use this modality to acquire knowledge and learning aims, a survey was done of the main, namely:

2. Flexibility: many students look for distance education courses just because they cannot or do not want to expose themselves to the rigidity required in physical classroom courses. In this sense, the flexibility offered by distance mode is configured as a great advantage;

Content availability: in most courses offered on site, the student attends classes that are offered only once and must write down and find other means for the given content is saved for future reference. In classes taught at distance, however, the content (usually recorded on video and audio) is available to the student for this review whenever necessary;

Low cost: you can find on the market courses offers in various levels of education with much lower prices compared to the prices of traditional classroom courses;

Studying at home at any time you want: one of the factors that made the distance learning courses a success is exactly the fact that many students belonging to the target audience are already in the labor market and seeking thereof to qualify for new requirements. Accordingly, the lack of rigidity concerning time and study site may also characterize an advantage of the distance education for students from the standpoint. Although proved very advantageous, the distance education has also some biases contrary to learning. Among these was conducted a survey of some major, namely:

You must have discipline: excessive flexibility can also represent a disadvantage to students who do not have enough discipline to be able to meet the required activities without the presence of a teacher to guide and supervise often;

Do not take the teacher to take questions at the very moment they arise: in regular classes, students can have the opportunity to ask questions in the very moment they arise, while in distance courses that does not happen so easily, causing the student to save his questions for some future time meeting or another contact with tutors and teachers (de Oliveira, Penedo, & Pereira, 2018).

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

The present study of Zoom based distance learning indicates that it can be an alternative to traditional teaching. The use of the platform Zoom in distance learning of foreign languages makes it possible to form and develop the language competencies of the students. According to the conducted research, students indicated such benefits of the Zoom platform as simplicity of installation, high quality of audio and video, the absence of connection drop-out. The results show that the students' attendance percentage of Zoom based distance learning lessons is higher than the attendance of the traditional lessons. The teachers indicated such advantages of the Zoom platform as reliable connection, simultaneous screen share, virtual background, active speaker view, desktop and application sharing, private and group chat, the option "Raise hand", breakout rooms. At the same time, there are many challenges in Zoom based distance learning, such as organizational

difficulties, the lack of students' initiative, actual anonymity of students' sent materials. We also provide several recommendations for the teachers of English as a foreign language on how to organize distance learning.

The process of digitalization and computerization influences the system of professional education in high school. As a new format of learning, distance learning has great potential. Thus, Zoom based distance learning can be a useful tool in improving the language skills of the students. However, its efficiency depends on several factors: digital literacy of the students and the teachers, establishing a significant interaction among all distant course participants, the lack of technical difficulties, appropriate teaching strategy, and organizational issues.

### 5.1. Contribution

The teachers indicated such advantages of the Zoom platform as a reliable connection, virtual background, active speaker view, desktop and application sharing, private and group chat, the option "Raise hand," breakout rooms. At the same time, there are several challenges, such as organizational difficulties, the lack of students' initiative, actual anonymity of students' sent materials. The authors conclude that a platform Zoom is a useful tool in improving students' language skills. However, its efficiency depends on some factors: digital literacy of the students and teachers, establishing an effective interaction among all distance course participants, the lack of technical difficulties, appropriate teaching strategy, and organizational issues.

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