Russian Students' Perception of Online Foreign Language Learning during COVID-19

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Abstract

The article discusses the results of the quantitative and qualitative survey on the online foreign language (FL) learning in Russian tertiary education during the pandemic that consisted of three parts: personal information, Likert scale and open questions. This anonymous survey includes the responses of 328 undergraduate and graduate students. It highlights main challenges students had to face studying FL online and their general thoughts and concerns connected with the issue. In general, the responses of the students of the Russian universities showed that the transition to online FL classes was a positive experience to them, since they confirmed that the quality of education and assessment seemed to be the same as well as the diversity, interaction and interest. Furthermore, they received more personalized feedback which means that their professors of FL adapted to the new situation quickly and managed to maintain the teaching process. Students seemed to appreciate the use of different platforms in class and for self-study. They mostly complained about the workload of written materials and insufficiency of speaking tasks. This study can contribute to similar research dedicated to experiences and opinions on online FL learning during the pandemic.

Keywords: foreign language learning, online learning, covid-19, tertiary education, Russia

1.   Introduction

Teachers and students around the world had to urgently switch to distance learning due to the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020. According to UNESCO, in May 2020 more than 70% of students worldwide did not attend their higher educational institutions. Both teachers and students have been forced to adapt to a changing environment and face the unfamiliar

environment of distance learning on different platforms. This research investigates students' perceptions of this transition including general thoughts and concerns connected with the issue as well as the outcome of such unplanned arrangements. Students from several Russian universities totalling 328 in number took part in the survey in the spring of 2021.

According to the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated May 7, 2018 No. 204, a target has been set to create a modern and safe digital educational environment by 2024 providing high quality and availability of education of all types and levels (NRO Center, 2019). What we observe now is that distance learning meets modern trends in education, allowing universities to include information and communication technology (ICT) within the teaching and learning community in order to create an amenable environment both for those who study and those who teach, and establish an atmosphere of active involvement in the educational process.

Before Covid-19 forced a universal move to online classes, e-learning was arguably the fastest-growing educational trend. It was driven by the growth of ICT and an increasing need for more flexibility in study opportunities, as students often combine work, classes, and their personal life. This has propelled online classes to the foreground in secondary and tertiary education. The expansion accelerated when the coronavirus pandemic hit in early 2020, prompting educational institutions all over the world to move classes online. This radical disruption to traditional face-to-face classes calls for further research not only on the effectiveness of e-learning, its best practices and limitations, but also on students' experiences.

The objectives of the research are to conduct a survey on online FL learning in Russian universities during the pandemic (spring 2021) and analyze its results to understand students' general perception of this shift to online classes and the challenges they faced. A corollary to this was the presentation of their thoughts on differences between online and offline studies as well as some practicalities: new skills acquired while studying online and the things that could be borrowed from online language classes to the offline mode.

2.   Literature Review

There is an extensive body of research investigating the benefits and limitations of e-learning, including its effectiveness, implications for assessment, and teacher and student satisfaction. Kemp & Grieve (2014) compared preferences for class material and assessment presented online and face-to-face among Australian undergraduate students and reported no significant difference in academic performance but a general preference for traditional face-to-face instruction. Students reported to be happier when asked to participate in discussions in traditional face-to-face classes. The positive effects of e-learning, as reported in student experience surveys, fall into the following categories: (1) convenience and inclusivity; (2) flexibility; (3) learner autonomy development; and (4) financial considerations.

Student surveys often place convenience at the top of reason for choosing e-learning over traditional face-to-face classes, as learners do not have to commute to university, pay for accommodation etc. An unexpected positive side-effect has been increased inclusivity as attested in Požgaj and Kneževiü (2014), as low mobility students acquire access to classes on a par with their mobile peers. Flexibility may refer not only to a greater freedom in choosing one's study schedule (which is important for mature students) but also in a possibility to allocate time to different tasks based on the needs of a particular learner and not the entire class. While face-to-face classes tend to move at a faster pace, whereas online learning is said to offer extra time to process the course material, fostering critical thinking and reflection (Ramsden, 1992; Robinson & Hullinger,

2008).The possibility to work through the class material multiple times has also been cited as an advantage as it results in deeper learning and better retention (Požgaj & Kneževiü 2014).

In terms of interaction, online classes are often characterised by a more impersonal and thus less confrontational nature, so introverted students feel more encouraged and less intimidated than in face-to-face classes (Warschauer, 1997; Hobbs, 2002; Kemp & Grieve, 2014).The expansion of e-learning opportunities offered in universities all over the world (including the popularity of flipped classrooms / blended learning) goes hand in hand with a paradigmatic shift where the teacher assumes the role of facilitator who manages the learning process, provides support and scaffolding but is no longer the main transmitter of knowledge (Balluerka et al., 2008; Strayer, 2012). This inevitably leads to increased student autonomy with students shouldering more responsibility for, firstly, their own knowledge acquisition (Ituma, 2011) and, secondly, self-regulation and motivation (Littlejohn et al. 2016) as opposed to face-to-face classes which promote a traditional teacher-centered model (Harden & Crosby, 2000; Prosser et al., 2005).

Finally, the rise in cost-effectiveness of education is shown to be another factor which prompted a number of universities to move at least some classes online (Smith & Hardaker, 2000; Alexander, 2001; Kemp & Grieve, 2014).

Despite the obvious benefits of e-learning, a large proportion of students feel certain negativity towards it. It has been explained by the difference between traditional face-to-face instruction that students are accustomed to, and the new online modality which relies on other patterns of engagement (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). This negative student response to e-learning appears to revolve around (1) technological constraints; (2) a feeling of disconnection; (3) a lack of motivation or inability to self-regulate or self-motivate; and (4) a lack of concentration during online classes. Technological issues can be daunting as students have reported a lack of the necessary skills for successful online study (Zhang & Perris, 2004; Holley & Oliver, 2010). While students tend to have no formal obstacles to participating in online classes because the majority owns a personal computer or a similar device (Požgaj & Kneževiü 2014), it remains a stress factor. One of the underlying reasons seems to be lack of stable Internet access.

Studies report that e-learning contributes to students' feeling disconnected both from peers and instructors (Otter et al. 2013), and no sense of community (Conole et al., 2008). It is substituted instead by what Garrison (2012) calls the community of inquiry, which does not equal the collaborative and constructivist environment that promotes deep learning. Furthermore, e-learning is characterized by a weaker feeling of engagement in the subject matter (Kemp & Grieve, 2014). The immediacy of teacher feedback available in face-to-face classes is opposed to delayed feedback typically employed in online classes (Kemp & Grieve, 2014).

While some studies cite inappropriate methods of instruction adopted by the teachers as reasons for students' dissatisfaction (Imel, 2002; Anderson & Dron, 2011), the changing role of teachers may be a factor. As teachers no longer perform the function of motivators, students find themselves forced to explore their inner resources and self-motivate, which most find challenging (Upton, 2006).

During the pandemic, both asynchronous and synchronous types (video conferencing) of learning have been applied. The latter has intrinsic interactive features of offline face-to-face learning and is considered to be more dynamic since students can interact with the instructor, in pairs or in groups in breakout rooms or in chat. This personal online interaction here-and-now is crucial in establishing a good rapport with students,

understanding and adopting a proper pace of the lesson and managing the class.

There are a lot of studies dedicated to online learning during the COVID 19 disruption in different countries. Mishra, Gubta, Shree (2020) conducted research at Mizorum University in India where they enumerated the platforms the teachers of their university used and dwelled upon the experiences, perceptions and reflections regarding the ongoing online teaching-learning process of both teachers and students during the COVID 19. According to their findings, students appreciated the readiness of the teachers for an online mode and technical support provided by the university. Students experienced difficulties with understanding conceptual knowledge and discourse activities. They would prefer online studies be more personalized. "It was found that teachers were unable to read the face and mood of students, and thus difficult to change the teaching pattern" (p. 6). The most frequent challenge was unstable network connection and other technical issues occurring during online classes.

It is evident that technological integration in online learning has played a critical role in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on educational activities, however, there are several challenges of online learning during the COVID pandemic in Fiji outlined by Chand et al. (2021) which are divided into four categories: (1) internet accessibility, cost of internet service, and computer literacy to join in digital learning; (2) socio-economic factor; (3) human and pet intrusions, and (4) assessment and supervision.

Mukhtar et al. (2020), Snoussi (2019), Almaiah et al. (2020), Alqahtani and Rajkhan (2020) and Dhawan (2020) put forward the following challenges of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: insufficient resources, problems in maintaining academic integrity, issues in policy, lack of students' self-discipline, technical issues and lack of confidence.

Surveys indicate that there were many challenges delivering online lectures in Afghanistan higher education (Salih and Taniwall, 2020; Khaliq et al., 2020; Noori and Orfan, 2021). Mohammadi et al. (2021) and Khlaif et al. (2020) argued that lack of guidelines, policies, and linguistic skills were the key challenges of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Hashemi (2021) added that lack of infrastructure and resources was the challenge of online teaching and learning in Afghanistan. Noori (2021) claim that students at Takhar University (Afganistan) have not experienced constant online teaching and learning due to a number of challenges and in general, the pandemic has negatively affected their learning.

Klimova (2021) was interested in the discussion of students' perception of and attitudes to online foreign language learning in the COVID-19 pandemic at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, the Czech Republic. Her findings suggest that students do not feel that they have improved their language skills by studying purely online. The results demonstrate students' preference for printed materials being more suitable for taking notes and retaining new words and phrases, especially when students can highlight them. Both teachers and students are well prepared for performing their online teaching-learning process which resulted in quite effective classes; however, offline FL classes are considered to be of a higher value than online classes and could not be replaced by the latter.

The current research might bring some valuable contribution to the overall picture of Russian students' perception of online FL studies during the pandemic and challenges they faced during this transition.

3.   Methodology

To identify how Russian students studying FL adapted to online education during the pandemic in 2021 and what their concerns were, an anonymous survey was conducted

involving 328 respondents. This number of respondents guaranteed the ability of the survey to accurately represent the target population. The selected online method of data collection could reach the individuals from different geographical parts of Russia. This random character of the respondents' search made the collected data representative in character.

Taking into consideration the gender, nationality, place of living, age, university level of the respondents it is truly representative as it includes all types of the total population in fair proportions. 56% of them are female and 44% are male, which is relatively equal and excludes restrictions due to any gender imbalance. The sample size of 94% being Russian was sufficiently large to provide statistical stability and actual information required for this survey and also provided an adequate basis for the measurement of its own reliability (see more details below).

The Google form platform was chosen for the survey because it is reliable and free and allows for the collection of responses in an Excel table that facilitated the analysis of the data.

The survey comprised 3 parts oriented to the research objectives that fitted the survey's conditions: part 1 – personal data questions to draw an average respondent portrait (age, gender, institution, origin). Part 2 – questions on a Likert scale that measure the opinion or attitude to learning a FL in the distance learning format. The scale indicates the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement. The response parameters ranged from minimum to maximum on a 5-point scale: from strongly agree to strongly disagree (1 - strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree). Part 3 – open questions. The respondents could express their opinion in a free form answering the following research questions: What are Russian university students' opinions on FL learning during the pandemic COVID-19? What new skills have the students acquired? What can be borrowed from online language classes to offline? What makes online language classes different from offline ones? The latter was aimed at the learning skills acquired during the quarantine, the difference between online and offline classes identified by the respondents and what they want teachers to implement in offline classes as opposed to the online format when they are back to class.

The synergy of this mixed method allowed us to monitor the respondents' background (Part 1), measure their answers and receive corollary information on their thoughts, concerns and ideas (Part 2) and analyze the open questions about the experience of online FL classes during the COVID-19 (Part 3) in order to understand better students' challenges and furthermore to improve both online and offline classes.

4.   Findings
4.1. The first part of the questionnaire

It took about 15 minutes for a respondent to complete all 3 parts of the survey. 94% of respondents are Russians, while among the remaining 6% are students from Azerbaijan, Colombia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and other countries whose native language is not Russian but they are studying in Russia. The majority of the respondents are young people: 89% are aged 17-22 (89%), 9% aged 23-28 and just 2% are older than 28. The majority of students surveyed are undergraduates, only 10% are Master's degree students, and 2% of those surveyed are postgraduates. 59 respondents (18%) are studying in small local universities who faced more challenges due to the low teachers' adaptability to the new requirements and the lack of equipment needed for sufficient work including stable Internet connectivity.

Students who participated were studying at the National Research University Higher

School of Economics (HSE University), the Pushkin Russian Language Institute, People's Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Nosov Magnitogorsk State University (NMSTU), Moscow State Pedagogical University (MPGU), Kuban State University (Kubsu), Sechenov University, Russian New University (ROSNOW) and the Linguistic University of Nizhniy Novgorod (LUNN) (Fig. 1). Overall it covers Russian regions from south to east, including the Urals.

Figure 1

Educational institutions in which the respondents are studying
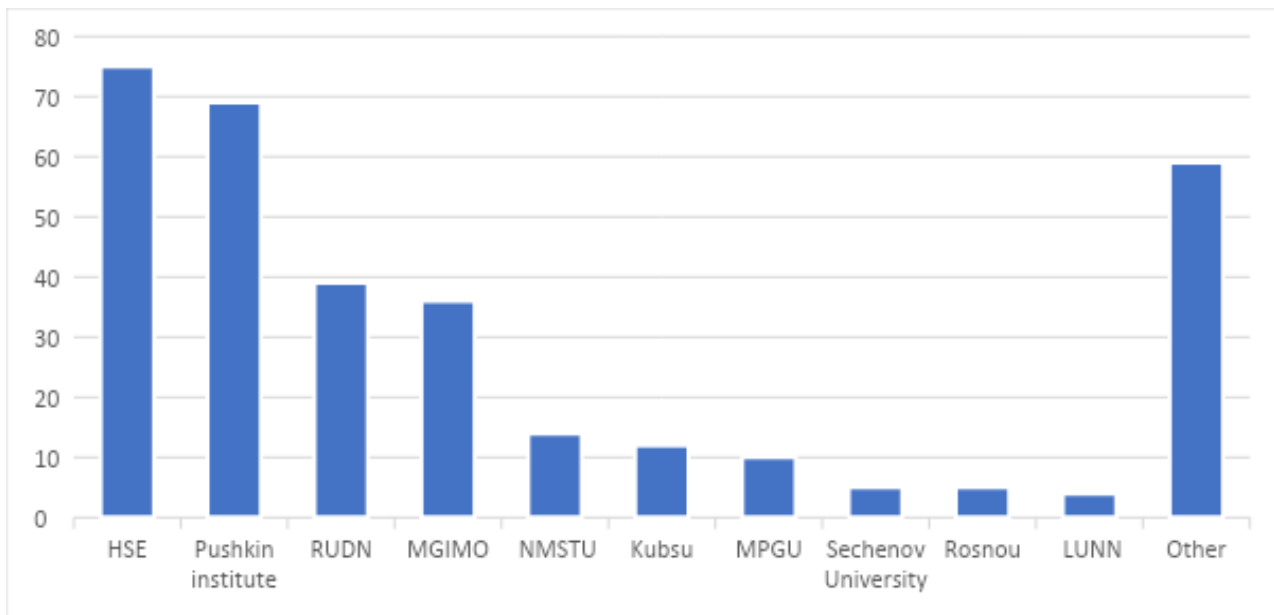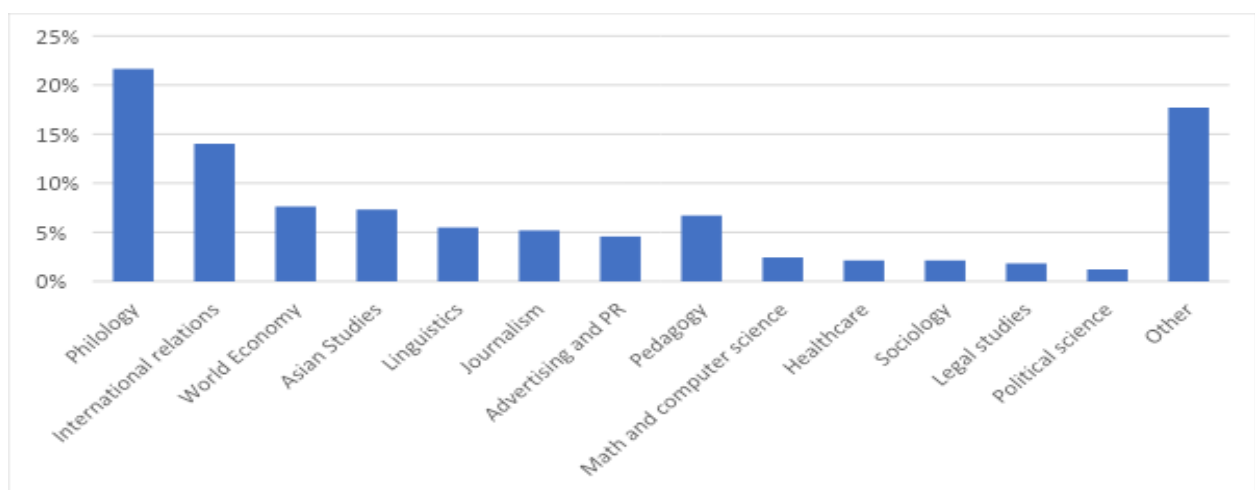

Figure 2

The majors of the respondents

Philology, international relations and the global economy are the most common majors among the respondents of the survey (Fig. 2). This factor might have influenced the outweighing proportion of male participants versus female ones because philology and international relations are highly likely to be studied by female students in Russia.

4.1. The second part of the questionnaire

The second part of the questionnaire comprised 15 statements rated by the respondents on the basis of the Likert scale from 1 to 5. Agreement with a statement is denoted with a plus (+) in the table, disagreement with a minus (-) whereas the mid-position with the equal sign (=) (see Table 1).

The data were analyzed together with the mean (MD) and standard deviations (SD). In our context "deviation" means a random fluctuation away from the mean of the distribution of a random variable, where "distribution" refers to intrinsic behavior of the random variable. SD of the participants' answers indicates the difference between measured values and true values. See the calculation, results, and analysis below.

Table 1

Description of the statements and representation of the mean and standard deviations

№	Description	Disagree (-) or Agree (+)	MD	SD
		Neither (=)		
1	My studies of foreign languages during the Coronavirus have become more interesting and diverse	=	2,954	0,826
2	My studies of foreign languages during the Coronavirus have become more interactive	=	3,055	0,992
3	My academic workload in foreign languages, such as homework and material for self-study, has increased during the Coronavirus	+	3,689	1,090
4	I cheat and plagiarize more studying online during the Coronavirus	=	2,512	1,071
5	I enjoy distance learning and do not want to go back to campus learning	-	2,424	1,287

6	I experience difficulties with time management, focus and self-Discipline	+	3,216	1,262
7	During online classes I become more distracted due to chatting windows, websites and other digital distractions compared to during the traditional classes at the university	=	3,082	1,210
8	My online classes are disrupted due to bad Internet access or outdated electronic devices	+	2,845	1,126
9	I have my space to study and family members do not interfere in it	+	3,872	1,077
10	I have found the transition to online studying easy	+	3,412	1,056
11	I find online classes more stressful than on campus classes	-	2,662	1,233
12	I feel that online classes in foreign languages offer fewer opportunities for peer or in-class discussions than face-to-face classes	+	3,381	1,120
13	The quality of my language classes has improved during the Coronavirus	=	2,756	0,890

14	I receive more feedback, for example, emails, comments in chats, etc. from my teachers of foreign languages during the Coronavirus. It has become more personalized	+	3,213	1,098
15	The evaluation of my skills in foreign languages by teachers has improved	=	2,976	0,682

The descriptive data revealed the overall agreement on certain effects of online learning being witnessed by the respondents (see table 2). The MD total was 46,049. The average number - the sum total divided by 15 criteria gave 3,069. The expected deviation (ED) was calculated according to the formula $\sqrt{(MD - average\ number)*(MD - average\ number)}$. The ED of the survey was $\sqrt{2.788} = 0.02\sqrt{6970} \approx 1.669$. The standard deviation points total were 16.02 divided by 15 criteria accounted for 1.068. The latter proved the validity and accuracy of the survey as the expected deviation 1.669 was higher than the actually received result of 1.068 points.

Table 2

The calculation of the expected deviation

Criteria #	MD	ED
1	2,954	0,013
2	3,055	0,0002
3	3,689	0,383
4	2,512	0,311
5	2,424	0,417

6	3,216	0,021
7	3,082	0,0001
8	2,845	0,050
9	3,872	0,643
10	3,412	0,117
11	2,662	0,166
12	3,381	0,096
13	2,756	0,098
14	3,213	0,459
15	2,976	0,008
Total	46,049	2,788

The data of the Likert scale illustrate that the respondents found the transition to online learning in the sphere of FL to be easy and not stressful. The classes have not changed much in terms of their quality, diversity, interactivity and interest. Moreover, the respondents did not admit to any rise of cheating or plagiarizing having online classes, and the evaluation of their knowledge, according to the majority of the respondents, is the same. Only some students feel more distracted due to chatting windows, websites and other digital distractions than during the traditional classes at the university. They agreed on receiving more feedback, for example, emails, comments in chats, etc. from their teachers of FL during the Covid-19 lockdown. Among other positive things is an easy and not stressful transference to an online learning environment. The majority has their personal working space with no family member interference. Among negative things can be the following changes: an increase of academic workload including homework and material for self-study, some problems with time management, self-study and focus, some disruptions with Internet connectivity and fewer opportunities for peer-interaction. Probably these negative aspects of online FL learning did not allow them to enjoy online classes and influenced their desire to return to an traditional educational environment.

The data analysis also revealed fluctuation throughout the levels of study. The perception of the online learning experience was found dependent on the level of study. Specifically, Bachelor degree students tended to agree with the statements more frequently, the MD is 3.08 for 1-2nd year-students and 3.12 for senior ones, while Master-degree

students (2.88) and postgraduates (2.86) did not detect many changes and were likely to disagree with them. The latter could be interpreted as Bachelor students' higher sensitivity to changes and less experience compared to the more senior levels of tertiary education.

The SD points gradually decreased from a Bachelor degree level to a postgraduate degree from 1.12 points for 1-2 year students, 1.08 points for senior Bachelors and Masters to 0.82 points for postgraduates. The deviation level reflected the accordance of opinion within the level of education from the lowest for tertiary starters to the highest level for its graduates.

4.3. The third part of the questionnaire

The analysis of the final part of the study and its three open questions on a) the learning/teaching technologies that the students would like teachers to bring back into offline classrooms; b) new skills acquired by them during the Coronavirus; c) differences of online communication from offline classes they are used to.

The answers offer a glimpse of how students felt about the abrupt switch to online study. While some students gave short yes/no answers, others offered lengthy paragraphs, mentioning more than one detail.

4.3.1. Question 1

When asked about the advantages of online classes, 15% of respondents answer, *nothing*. The remaining student body cites the interactive online tools (8%), increased personalisation of the teachers' response and feedback (8,5%), a rise in listening and watching activities (7,6%), online testing (5%), online homework submission and grading (4%), better communication with teachers and peers via messenger chats and use of online platforms for dealing with organisational issues such as posting homework or keeping track of assignment due dates (4%), and the teachers' efforts to keep up the positive environment during online classes (3,6%).

Contrary to previous research findings, having experienced online language classes in times of Corona, students do not seem to put convenience and flexibility on top of their lists of advantages (2,4%). Among the student-generated answers, there is "more time for independent work", the chance to juggle studies and work due to greater schedule flexibility, the comfort of one's own home, the possibility to attend classes in case of emergency (e.g. being sick does not prevent you from joining an online class), and, on a more humorous note, the ability to "drink tea in class".

This list of the best things about the Corona-times online classes is instead topped by a significant rise in the use of listening and watching activities (with YouTube apparently being everyone's go-to resource). FL teachers appear to have introduced a previously unseen number of online videos into their lesson plans, to the delight of 7,6% of the respondents, who would very much like to see this tendency continued once face-to-face classes are back.

Online homework submissions and grading are eco-friendlier (students do not have to look for ways to print out a hard copy) and save time, according to 4,2%. 8,5% of students feel that online essays receive more personalised feedback from teachers.

Apart from a more personalised approach and feedback, the overall emotional connection between teachers and students seems to have increased during Corona, with 3,6% citing better communication due to the teachers' "understanding", "warmth" or "sense of humour".

Testing seems to be more popular online rather than in a face-to-face classroom, as it is faster. As a result, 5% of the respondents would rather continue taking tests online even

when face-to-face classes are resumed, with only a handful of students (0,9%) concerned with the greater cheating possibilities and questioning the academic integrity of both themselves and their peers.

Regarding the disadvantages of the online classes, students report a decrease in speaking activities and oral practice, with 7% wishing for more speaking practice as soon as offline classes are resumed. These should include debates, round tables, student presentations, and discussions on a wider range of topics than they normally get a chance to discuss in class. Besides, 2% of the respondents would appreciate more pair or group work.

Another reason for concern among 3% is a lack of real life communication in online classes. Students share a longing for "energy exchange which is possible only on offline lessons" which creates an emotional void even though "the quality of education remains in the same level during online lessons".

The results demonstrate that during the Corona-enforced move to online classes, FL teachers increased the written work load of their students and relied heavily on online interactive tools and study apps, such as Flipgrid or interactive boards. While the use of the online study tools was welcomed by the students (who would like to preserve this in offline classrooms), it may have led to a reduction of oral interaction during classes. This claim is supported by a large proportion of students asking for more pair and group work, more interactive oral activities such as debates or round tables etc. as opposed to so much written homework.

However, on the bright side, the increase in written work has led to more personalized feedback that students now receive from teachers, and they like it (on the other hand, the teachers are likely to report a dramatic rise in time spent on grading written homework). To deal with the decreased speaking practice in an online class, some students resorted to seeking speaking partners online among native speakers.

4.3.2. Question 2

To answer the second question, students consider what new skills, if any, they have acquired during their online studies during the pandemic. With 24,6% of responses, the top answer appears to be directly related to overall time management and self-discipline skills (the two seem to go hand in hand for most students).

Students list "time-management, planning, independence" and report having learned to "do something high quality at the last moment", although not everyone is quite happy with their achievement yet (e.g. "Discipline, but I'm still not good enough").

Some answers, like "faster doing bigger amounts of homework", "now teachers don't give us as much time for various tests as before, so students need to think quickly" or "Learning more information and materials in a short period of time", indicate an increase in the workload. To quote one student's answer, "concentration, time- management were needed more than usually". Apparently, during the pandemic students were expected to complete more assignments, and teachers tended to set more homework than before. This might have prompted 3% of students to add multitasking to their 'new skills' list.

As many as 17% of students, however, claim to have acquired no new skills at all, making this the second most popular answer. The question itself seems to strike a chord and elicit sarcastic responses, such as "How to eat quietly during classes", "I've acquired nothing, only new ways to cheat", "No new skills, I've cheated more than learned", and even "I have only lost skills".

Another 17,6% focus on an overall confidence students have acquired when using online platforms, such as "Skills of using different platforms like MS Teams, Zoom, Webinar", "programming". Some report they have lost the fear of "using new technology

for communicating with people".

Some answers (8%) indicate a positive impact that online studies have had on the development of learner autonomy, study skills and self-motivation, e.g. "I began to study more myself" and "became more enthusiastic about my study and much more responsible". For some students, the pandemic proved an incentive to explore online learning opportunities, including "Using some apps that help me to study" and platforms such as Coursera (e.g. "Coursera's how to learn"). Just over 2% of responses refer to improved cognitive abilities, concentration, and memory.

Regarding language studies, this has manifested itself in some students resorting to online tools where they sought tutoring from native speakers. Others found conversation partners, e.g. "I found a language partner on HelloTalk. I thought about doing this a long time ago but the lockdown made me finally do it. I find these classes with my language partner very effective and interesting" or "Using messengers for studying and now I like to talk with native speakers online". These activities were not arranged or even prompted by the university. Rather, this is the case of students assuming responsibility for their own FL progress.

Up to 20% of students report a marked improvement in their FL skills, with 8% singling out listening comprehension. This may be down to the increased time spent online which has allowed students to watch more videos and interact with native speakers more. In some cases, poor Internet connectivity has impeded the use of video during classes, so students have grown less reliant on video materials and have improved their listening comprehension instead (e.g. "Listening. Even if the connection, sound and image is bad, I still can talk about the main idea of the video or audio", "perceive information by ear without a photo").

Improvements in other language skills are reported by marginal numbers of students, among them overall online communication skills (2.4%), vocabulary (2.4%), speaking (2%), and reading (1.8%).

Whereas it may sometimes be hard to differentiate between improvements in speaking overall, i.e. oral production, and online communication, an important comment must be made here. The latter refer to adjustments students claim to have learnt to make based on the communication needs required by the online mode. These include "being understood, while internet connection is really bad. It improves the skill of speaking fast and legible", "compassion to others and listening to them (not really a learning skill but an interaction skill)", "how to be patient and listen to others first", and even how one "can ask the teacher and not to interrupt them (chat)".

4.3.3.Question 3

When asked to sum up their online learning experience in times of Corona by answering the question (what exactly makes online classes different from face to face classes?) students overwhelmingly (39%) pointed to the lack of physical contact between participants of the learning process, both between the students and the teacher, as well as between peers. For a minority of 4.5% of students, the increased distance has had a positive impact, as they now have "a chance to have a word with [instructors] in private in usual Corona-free life", "during online classes the teacher manages to work with all students", and there has emerged a feeling of equality (as one student puts it, "we're all in the same boat", referring to the teachers and students). Built-in chats in platforms such as Zoom have facilitated student-to-student interaction without bothering the teacher and disrupting the class (e.g. "We can also chat via messengers, it's getting easier if you stay in touch"). For some students, the proximity of the screen as opposed to classroom blackboards has

become a boon (e.g. "Everybody can see the screen").

For the majority (34.4%), however, the physical distance has proven to be the biggest challenge of online classes during Corona. Online classes are predominantly framed as "unreal" or "artificial", devoid of "soul", "uncomfortable", and not having "the same vibe". Conversely, face to face classes are described as "real" and "alive". Students consider lack of video (many teachers and classmates have their cameras off) critical, as they "do not see faces and reactions of our group mates" and feel a "lack of personal reactions". They miss "nonverbal forms of communication" and suffer from the inability to check "understanding of what I'm saying" when addressing an online audience.

Technical issues are mentioned by 8.8% of students (e.g. "Poor Internet connection becomes a barrier to effective communication", "It is not possible to build normal communication during online training, because very often there are problems with the Internet" etc.). The immediate consequence of poor connection is the disruption to communication caused by interruptions, mentioned by 7% of students (e.g. "It's hard to understand when it's your turn to answer", "You don't know when someone wants to answer and it's awkward", "It is hard not to speak simultaneously with someone because you don't see the others" etc.).

Presumably, teachers lack proper online classroom management skills to allow for an unhindered discussion ("teacher should organize the process more carefully to avoid it").

Switching from face to face to online classes has resulted in a difference in the stress levels (7.6%). For 3.9%, online classes tend to be less stressful, due to increased privacy (these are the students who avoid using cameras during classes). However, 3.6% report an increased level of stress arising from "alienation", "loneliness", lack of intimacy because of cameras, online tests, and a general "irritation [be]cause of online". Considering the above mentioned issue of interruptions, participating in an online discussion, presumably choosing the right moment to join in, might be another reason (e.g. "In a class I always participate in discussion, but online it's quite difficult for me to turn on a microphone and start talking as the whole world can hear only me. I think it's a psychological problem, but it exists").

Teachers overall seem to have become less emotionally available for students, which has also contributed to increased stress levels (3%). This has manifested itself in a sadness due to lack of emotional involvement on the part of the teachers (e.g. "I can't see my teacher's face, his emotions and smile and it makes me sad"), increased homework (1.2%) and teachers becoming "less responsive and less understanding and willing to compromise". Some students interpret this as a sign of the teachers shirking off responsibility, e.g. "Teacher doesn't take responsibility to make his/her student understand the essence of the task or studying issue during online classes, shifting everything on students".

Moreover, trust between teachers and students has been undermined, "During online classes teachers are very angry and don't believe us, give insanely much homework that there is even no time to eat normally".

This may be at least partially a result of the compromised academic integrity, Indeed, 3% openly admit to cheating more (e.g. "you can actually hide yourself if you don't want to talk or to be watched, it is really easy to cheat, to be honest, I also did this", "you know you can switch off your mic or just log out of chat and you won't answer the hardest question", "you can easily cheat on everything and no one would notice").

On a more positive note, many respondents tend to favour the physical comfort and convenience that comes with studying online from home (15%). They are happy to dispense with commute time, formal dress code, early mornings, and sick leaves (e.g. "You

don't need to come to university, dress classical uniform, but ability to attend a class regardless of the circumstances"). However, for 3.9%, the flip side is lack of concentration and the challenges that come with the blurred lines between home and work (e.g. "it seems to me that it is extremely important to separate the work space and the leisure space").

5.   Discussion

Russia was among the countries where Corona-induced lockdown measures influenced many spheres of life, tertiary education included. This survey is relevant and important since students' feedback is crucial in the improvement of the learning and teaching process. The research shed light on the attitude of Russian students towards online learning a FL during the COVID-2019 pandemic.

In general, the responses of the students of the Russian universities showed that the transition to online FL classes was a positive experience to them, since they confirmed that the quality of education and assessment seemed to be the same as well as the diversity, interaction and interest. Furthermore, they received more personalized feedback which means that their professors of FL adapted to the new situation quickly and managed to maintain the teaching process. These results of the survey inspire optimism as to the future potential of online learning. However, students confessed that they would like to go back to offline FL classes. Some students complained about technical problems and digital distractors, an increase in the amount of work and materials for self-study, some difficulties with time management, focus and self-discipline.

The students responded that they would like to introduce to their offline classes the use of online platforms because the material is structured and one can always get access to it. Moreover, they would like to get their homework tasks via emails, text messengers or other electronic forms, be tested online and have interactive e-games. Many students highlighted that they had learnt self-discipline, time-management, the skill of using online resources and other learning platforms and even were encouraged to find new apps for online learning. The students also appreciated a significant rise in the use of listening and watching activities, eco-friendliness, more personalized feedback and an overall emotional connection between teachers and students (better communication due to the teachers' "understanding", "warmth" or "sense of humour"). Among pluses are also comfortable home conditions, saving time for commuting and equality of all students and teachers.

The negative aspects of online FL classes are disrupted Internet connection, distraction that students might experience during the lesson, the lack of live contact with touch, emotions, eye-contact and other things which comprise physical interaction. Students also outlined a decrease in speaking activities and oral practice and an increase of written work load. They claimed that online classes are "unreal" or "artificial", devoid of "soul", "uncomfortable", and not having "the same vibe". According to some students, the stress level is high and there is a feeling of "alienation", "loneliness" and lack of intimacy. Academic integrity was also compromised: most of the students answered that they learnt new tricks of cheating.

The survey has a number of limitations: firstly, the students might not have answered the questions honestly either intentionally or unintentionally. It seems to be impossible to verify the degree of honesty. However, the students were not forced to do the survey and it did not influence their grades, so we presuppose that most answers were true and reflected their way of thinking. Secondly, some questions on the Likert scale were not answered in a clearly agreeing or disagreeing way. The students chose "neither agree nor disagree" which might be interpreted as they were not sure or hesitated to answer the question. Thirdly, the interpretations of the results are of a qualitative character and might depend on the

interpreters since this process itself is subjective. Finally, the survey was conducted immediately after the first wave of the pandemic when the Covid-enforced change for online classes was hectic, which might have influenced the results of the study and which might differ when the online process is smoother and well implemented.

However, we were not aimed at having some particular results to meet the hypothesis and tried to be unbiased tracking the main tendencies of answers. Finally, since the research took place mostly among students majoring in philology, international relations and world economy who are females, there can be some gender or professional bias.

6.   Conclusions

The study reveals the attitude of Russian students toward a shift to online FL classes during 2021. It reveals plusses and minuses of teaching FL online and helps to understand the students' needs better to adjust further teaching FL online to meet their expectations and make the process more effective.

In conclusion many things require further technical, methodological and organizational development. It is important to find a balance between traditional classes and online learning, and develop new technologies that will allow us to maintain full-fledged communication between participants in education. No modern technical developments can at the moment replace live communication in the classroom, however, if studying online it is recommended to alternate teaching on LMS platforms with the practice via various video applications that simulate live communication and not to forget about entertaining platforms. Speaking and interactive part should be enhanced so students do not feel they are deprived of communication and personalized approach.

The results of the survey can be used by FL teachers to improve both online and offline classes, understanding the needs of their students better, educational experts to evaluate the current level of online FL classes at universities in Russia and other people interested in education and FL. This research can contribute to the overall understanding of the online shift in education in the pandemic time.

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