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A comparative study of Bosnian and Herzegovinian adult foreign language students' attitudes to teaching four skills in classroom and distance language learning systems

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Abstract

Widespread use of information and communication technology is a cornerstone of today's society. This results in significant changes in communication, information flow, business operations, gaining knowledge and other aspects of life. Needs and requirements in the field of education are, thus, also changing. Skills for autonomous research and lifelong learning are gaining importance. Educational institutions and teachers as individuals are faced with the challenge of changing the concept of knowledge delivery which has to imply almost inevitable integration of modern technology. Considering the need to change educational systems in accordance with the changes in the society, marked by constant increase of information and knowledge base as well as by dynamic and fast paced development of information and communication technology, distance education is becoming an increasingly significant concept. A need to learn foreign languages is always present, regardless of teaching methods. This paper considers possibilities and specific elements throughout the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system compared to the traditional, in-class teaching system. The goal of the research is to analyze whether the methods of foreign language teaching used in the distance education system can be as equally efficient as the traditional teaching methods and whether the lack of face-to-face contact in the distance education system can be compensated by the use of information and communication technology.

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Introduction

The concept of distance education has been the subject of numerous studies from different perspectives, such as the willingness of teachers or students to engage in this process, the evaluation of software platforms for this type of knowledge delivery, the interaction between teachers and students, and the problem of students' withdrawal from distance learning courses.

There was a tendency to understand that the focus of such a system of education is on technology. However, educators who are experienced in working within such a system claim that technology is not as important as other factors such as student motivation and other pedagogical aspects and understanding the context of distance education and the requirements it places on those who participate in it.

The aim of this paper is to provide an insight into the advantages and disadvantages of teaching foreign language by means of the distance education system, and to define guidelines and suggestions for the improvement of this form of teaching. The results of the analysis of the possibilities and effectiveness of methods for learning and teaching a foreign language via the distance education system could be particularly useful and applicable at educational institutions at which foreign languages are taught. The basic hypothesis of this research is that the methods utilized in the teaching of a foreign language in the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach. It is additionally assumed that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, awareness of the importance of education is still underdeveloped, and people are burdened and preoccupied with existential problems, and too little informed about alternative forms of education, knowledge is not appreciated, and the state has not yet done everything in its power to secure conditions for lifelong learning programs not to mention distance education programs. However, there additionally exist examples of positive practices of individual higher education institutions which make efforts to follow trends in the development of higher education and adapt their work systems to those trends.

Literature review

The number of academic programs organized with the aid of the distance education system by public and private educational institutions is increasing every year (Boling, Krinsky, Saleem & Stevens, 2011). As participants in the higher education process become more technologically aware, electronic systems of knowledge delivery will not be an exception in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Research and improvement of the quality of electronic education systems in order to achieve the same effects as in the traditional teaching environment is enhancing in the field of higher education.

Although the general notion supports the belief that the use of distance education systems is most widespread in information education, recent research (Holmes & Gardner 2006; Kearsley, 2005; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; White, 2003; Keegan, 2000) shows that this system can be effectively applied in different fields of education. Similar to any other field in the education system, the process of learning a foreign language is transforming due to the use of modern technologies. In the past, there was a great deal of discussion and research on whether technology should be integrated into the foreign language learning process, but now the focus is shifting towards efforts to make the best use of technology, since its existence cannot be ignored.

Although the belief that the use of distance education systems is mainly widespread in information education is generally accepted, recent research (Holmes & Gardner 2006; Kearsley, 2005; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; White, 2003; Keegan, 2000) demonstrates that this system can be effectively applied in different fields of education. Similar to any other field of education, the process of learning a foreign language is changing due to the use of modern technologies. In the past, there were different opinions on the use of technology in foreign language learning process, but now the focus is shifting towards efforts to make the best use of the technology, since its existence cannot be ignored.

In the context of learning a foreign language, complex demands are placed before students. Shetzer (1998 quoted in Kasper 2000:96-97) states that ESL students must acquire linguistic competence in a new language and at the same time develop the cognitive and sociocultural skills necessary to gain access into the social, academic, and workforce environments of the 21st century. They must become functionally literate, able to speak, understand, read, and write English, as well as use English to acquire, articulate and expand their knowledge. They must also become academically literate, able to read and understand interdisciplinary texts, analyze and respond to those texts through various modes of written and oral discourse, [...] Further, they must become critically literate [...] to evaluate the validity and reliability of informational sources so that they may draw appropriate conclusions from their research efforts". Finally, in

our digital age of information, students must become electronically literate, able choose the most suitable tools for communication, learning, studying and research.

Foreign language teaching in the distance education system enables the development of language competences and, at the same time, the development of skills related to the use of contemporary information and communication technologies.

It can be denoted that the link between the development of technology and methods for teaching and learning foreign languages has been present since the invention of Gutenberg printing press, which resulted in the widespread distribution of written materials. However, over the last hundred years, this link has evolved beyond the physical level, by means of the efforts of researchers to establish connections between technology and the learning process at the psychological level. There is an increased interest in research into processes that exist in human consciousness and enable the acquisition of a foreign language. With the development of technology, teachers and researchers have sought ways to apply new discoveries as a form of support in the language learning process. However, the relation between language learning and technology has rarely been straightforward. Foreign language teachers have often shown a great deal of skepticism to the application of modern technological solutions to the language learning process.

In distance learning research, analyses pertaining to the field of foreign language learning take a marginal position. The reason is not only to the complexity of integrating all language skills into the virtual environment, but also to the expressed skepticism of a large number of teachers in terms of the possibility of developing linguistic competences in the electronic learning system.

However, the increasing integration of information and communication technologies into education is radically changing the way foreign language learning and teaching is conducted and motivates teachers to define new learning models and new teaching strategies. A growing number of higher education institutions are transferring themselves to the electronic way of teaching a foreign language and the use of computers as a means of interaction, collaboration and access to information. Modern technologies have brought about changes in the form of teaching materials and the way students approach these materials. In order to make the most of the benefits which new media can provide in the process of learning a foreign language, teachers should be aware that their role is changing. They now guide students through the learning process. Guidance involves planning, organizing, interacting with students, and supporting the learning process, as well as devising teaching strategies to maximize the benefits

of electronic learning. Teachers also face the challenge of evaluating ELT materials suitable for online use. They also must consider teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction in order to achieve effective learning.

The application of modern technologies provides numerous opportunities to solve problems which occur in a traditional face-to-face environment. The basic limitations that occur in traditional foreign language teaching environment are:

- work with a large number of students
- different levels of language proficiency
- absence from classes
- limited resources and lack of time for direct contact
- lack of time to provide personalized feedback, which discourages students from working independently
- lack of time for tasks involving voice communication and developing presentation skills
- low degree of interaction among students

Some of these limitations can be addressed in an adequately designed distance learning environment. A large number of students can simultaneously use the distance learning system, which provides flexibility in the learning process in various ways. Students can work at their own pace and have access to multimodal documents. (Curtis, Duchastel & Radic, 1999). Distance learning environments provide a personalized approach to learning, as well as conceptualization of activities for different learning styles and levels of language proficiency. Students can independently determine the learning sequence, select materials, tasks and activities, or identify what type and level of support they need (Cummins 2002). The concept of hypertextuality enables teachers to design activities in which students can receive support in various ways (e.g. through online vocabulary, clarification, examples) when they need it.

The main advantages of teaching foreign languages in the distance learning system are the indicated below (Warschauer, 1996; Wang Han, 2008):

- computers enable independent work at an individual pace, in time and place appropriate for students
- multimedia content which combines text, images, sounds, animations and videos easily integrates reading, writing, listening and speaking skills
- communication technology enables different forms of interaction between students and teachers, as well as among students themselves
- realistic learning environments can be created with the help of computers,

- application of modern technologies has a positive effect on motivation and autonomy in the learning process,
- the possibility to recycle the same teaching resources, which is very important in the learning process
- computers are ideal in terms of performing repetitive drill exercises, as they eliminate the fatigue or subjectivity factor and provide immediate feedback

When they leave their passive role as recipients of information and become active participants in the learning process, students require much more individual attention, which can create two problems. The first problem is reflected in the overwhelming number of students who want the teacher's attention for explanation and guidance. The teacher cannot answer all of these requests at the same time, so students have to wait, contact their peers, or feel deprived of the required attention due to lack of time. As a consequence, some may discover that there is a lack of feedback, attention in such a system.

At the same time, the fact that it is impossible for a teacher to respond to all requests can somehow force students to trust their peers and work closely with them, which is a very positive result and a valuable skill in the job market. Another problem is striking a balance between encouraging student autonomy and thus developing their capacity to learn autonomously and their need for feedback and support. For students who need a lot of guidance and for the analytical type of students, this lack of attention at some point can negatively affect their satisfaction and motivation. It can be claimed that this problem usually does not exist in a traditional environment.

Foreign language learning should be viewed in the context of the current trend of lifelong learning, which focuses on the social and economic benefits which result from the joint action of information, education, work and technology.

If we accept the claim that in many parts of the world today, through the educational process, student autonomy is developed and that learning process is generated in interaction, we can conclude that the traditional teaching process cannot provide the optimal environment for this form of learning (Legenhausen, 1999). In most cases, the linear structure of the classical teaching system does not provide much opportunity for additional measures and activities to develop discrete individual and group learning processes.

In the context of teaching and learning a foreign language, in addition to developing the four basic skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, it is also necessary to work on skills which students will need in the labor market:

- individualization of learning through tasks which students freely select depending on their personal needs and interests
- promotion of learning through various activities of searching, selecting and transmitting information
- development of information literacy through the application of modern tools offered by new technologies
- development of the self-learning skills necessary for the lifelong learning process

Foreign language teaching materials in the distance education system

Foreign language teaching materials in the distance education system can be structured according to skills, with separate sections for reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Reading

Corresponding to Reading skill, emphasis is placed on activating students' background knowledge by combining text with graphic, audio and video materials. Electronic teaching materials allow users to focus on different parts of the text - in a non-linear way - to mark different items and to use additional, associated tasks and auxiliary materials. Reading skills can be significantly improved by utilizing the resources provided by the Internet. Thanks to the extensive electronic resources on the Internet, students have access to contemporary and motivating authentic texts of different genres. In addition, students can additionally participate in discussions with others who read the same text. A number of newspapers and magazines have their own blogs where readers can share their opinions and discuss what they read. The ability to discuss a text encourages the integration of written and spoken language production. For the initial level of learning a foreign language, it is avail to combine simultaneous listening and reading for the student to adapt to an oral and written system of a new language, whereby digital tools can be employed to repeat listening, marking parts of text or translating. Developing reading skills for each level of language proficiency can be encouraged by various tasks and exercises which require finding and linking information, synthesis of information, and discussions in spoken or written form.

Writing

The use of hypermedia and computers provides a number of opportunities to develop writing skills. Input information from a variety of sources, such as text, video, and audio materials, can create context so as to work on real-life tasks which require writing activities. Most modern-day students are aware and informed of the available resources which may be

useful in the process of writing in a foreign language. Nevertheless, the teacher should guide students in the process of finding and adequately utilizing available online resources. With specific assignments, students can be engaged in various stages of the writing skill development process. These assignments might include asking questions, providing models and examples to guide them in the process of producing a written text, etc. The teacher can present specific authentic linguistic models to their students in order to develop a sense of writing in a language they are learning. The advantage of the online environment is the ability to easily save and share not only the final product, but also the various stages of the writing process. It provides students with the opportunity to publish and share their texts with other users on forums and various websites, which positively affects students' motivation. In addition, the ability to publicly publish a text may be rewarding to the author of the text as their text will be viewed from distinct perspectives, but it can also assist other participants in the discussion of the text to develop their own writing skills.

Listening

It is desirable to practice listening skills through the process of replicating real-life situations in which listening is performed with the purpose of interaction. In this context, the input to the listening activity should be conceptualized in order to stimulate oral response. The distance learning system provides further opportunities to perform listening exercises than the traditional system. Namely, listening exercises in the distance learning system, in addition to audio and video content, also involve the application of various hypertext materials, such as text support (transcripts or additional information that can be displayed on the screen during listening) or electronic dictionaries, which students can access easily. Another significant difference from the classical system is that in the distance learning system, students have a much more active role, especially with regard to listening activities. These activities can also be associated with appropriate tasks such as summary writing, listening comprehension, semantic network creation, which encourages careful listening comprehension and analysis of listening materials for a specific purpose. One of the significant advantages provided by the distance learning system in the context of developing a listening skill, i.e. understanding, is that the resources and content that develops this skill can be accessed as many times as the user considers necessary. The Internet offers several opportunities to advance one's listening skills. Podcasts, some of which are tailor-made for student needs and other authentic listening materials are available in a variety of formats. It is desirable to practice listening skills through the process of replicating real-life situations in which listening is employed with the purpose of

interaction. In this context, the input to the listening activity should be conceptualized in order to stimulate the oral response. The distance learning system provides more opportunities for performing listening exercises than the traditional system. Namely, listening exercises in the distance learning system, in addition to audio and video content, also embrace the application of various hypertext materials, such as text support (transcripts or additional information that can be displayed on the screen during listening) or electronic dictionaries, which students can access very simply. Another substantial discrepancy from the classical system is that in the distance learning system, students have a much more active role, especially in terms of listening exercises. Listening exercises can also be associated with appropriate tasks such as writing a summary, replying to a listening content, creating a semantic network, etc. Writing tasks and discussing a listened-to record encourage careful listening and analysis for a specific purpose.

Speaking

Through hypermedia content, input information is combined in written and spoken form to create a context which requires student participation in speaking activities, individually or in interaction with other students. The main advantage of the distance learning system corresponding to these activities is the possibility to record a speech composition which can be listened to, analyzed and re-recorded until a satisfactory level is reached. In this way, it is possible to obtain a quality product since students have the opportunity to reorganize information and discover appropriate and accurate language forms and elements. Recording a speech also means that the conversation does not take place in the context of immediate contact. Therefore, students should pay special attention to performing this activity as there is no possibility of relying on the context and gestures present in direct communication.

Other advantages of the distance learning system for developing speaking skills are the availability of resources for comprehension and speech production, processing time, and perhaps most importantly, the opportunity for all students to perform in communicative activities as opposed to the traditional classroom environment where they are more advanced and more confident individuals have a kind of monopoly in this context.

Both asynchronous and synchronous communication, in written and spoken form, can be used to improve pronunciation. It is possible to use various exercises which focus the student's attention on specific sounds or combinations of sounds, and on the production of problematic sounds and patterns. One of the benefits of an online environment is the ability to listen to recorded tracks repeatedly and use visual resources which illustrate pronunciation. It is possible

to organize sessions with a student individually or small groups of students with a focus on certain phonological aspects in spoken production.

Method

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Information Technology, Džemal Bijedić University in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina with first, second- and third-year students. A total of 624 students responded to the survey. Both students studying in the distance education system and students following classes in the traditional way responded.

In this paper, a method of structural-functional analysis was used, based on which the structure and characteristics of the electronic education system and the principles of teaching a foreign language within this system were presented. By means of the method of comparative analysis, this form of teaching is compared with the classical approach to teaching a foreign language. Students' attitudes and attitudes towards teaching a foreign language in the e-education system were collected in the survey. The MS Excel software tool was utilized in the analysis of the research results. The following statistical methods were applied: data acquisition and primary processing, data sorting, tabulation, data visualization, Cronbach Alpha and Hi-square test.

Data collection and primary processing

The data collected was transferred into a worksheet. The worksheet comprised a total of 624 rows for 624 subjects, whose answers were noted in the corresponding columns. Incomplete data was not treated. For numerical characteristics such as the number of years of studying English, the mean, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation were calculated.

The data was sorted in accordance with the question reflected. Qualitative data was sorted in such a way that for each value of the trait was determined by how many respondents had the related value. For the quantitative type data, mean, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation were calculated. The mean showed the middle of the set, and the coefficient of variation describes how much the data in the set varies and since it is a relative measure, the coefficients of variation for two different variables can be meaningfully compared. Standard variation is a linear measure of the deviation of elements in a set from the mean.

The response structure is expressed in percentages such that the percentage represents the proportion of the number of students who answered a given question in a particular way in the total number of answers to that question.

Tabulation

Contingency tables were created demonstrating frequency of response to questions for students studying in distance learning systems and students studying in the classical way.

Data visualization

Sorted or tabulated data was presented with adequate diagrams, e.g. gender structure is shown in a pie chart showing the proportion of men and women in the total number of respondents, certain frequency distributions are shown in a line diagram, and the differences between the two types of responses are shown by a radar diagram.

Cronbach Alpha

To determine whether the interdependencies of categorical variables can be tested, Cronbach Alpha was calculated as a standard measure of the homogeneity of a set of categorical answers to questions. After it was established that tests for all categorical variables could not be performed, this test was employed for specific groups of questions.

Chi-squared test

The Chi-squared test for contingency tables tested whether there was a relationship between the answer to a particular question and the status of the student (whether the student is studying within the distance education system or in a classical way).

The chi-square test was generated subsequent to tabulating and determining the Cronbach Alpha value, and it tested our hypothesis i.e. whether the methods used in teaching a foreign language in the e-learning system could be as effective as the methods utilized in the classical approach foreign language teaching, as well as the secondary hypothesis that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the electronic education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student, characteristic of the classical approach to teaching.

Results

A total of 624 students responded to the survey. Regarding the gender structure of the respondents, 504 were men, 63 were women, and 57 did not answer the question about gender.

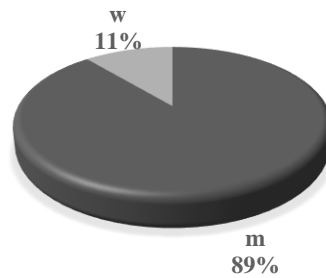


Figure 1.- Gender structure

Students were between 18 and 53 years old, with a median of 20, a mean of 21.1, a standard deviation of 3.26, and a coefficient of variation of 0.155. As the coefficient of variation is small, it is evident that most students are homogeneous between the age of 18 and 23, with an exceedingly small number of extreme values (53 years).

The study involved 378 distance learning (DL) students and 243 In-Class (IC) students, and 3 students did not respond to this question.

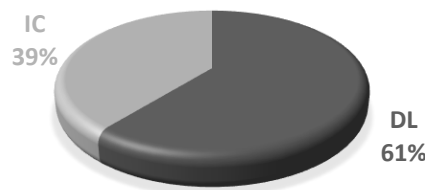


Figure 2.- Structure of respondents according to the type of study

Out of the total number of respondents, 343 identified that the type of study was their primary choice, 103 specified that the type of study was not their primary choice, and 103 did not respond to this question.

Out of the total number of respondents, the majority were second year students since the median is 2.

When asked about the number of years of previous English language learning, the answers ranged from 0 to 12; the median was 9, the mean was 8.84, the standard deviation was 2.90, and the coefficient of variation was 0.328.

To determine the homogeneity of the response set, a Cronbach Alpha of 0.906 was calculated. It means that the data are homogeneous, and further analysis based on the answers to these questions can be considered exceptionally reliable.

To reach conclusions related to our hypothesis on differences in the acquisition of the English language material between distance learning and in-class students, the Chi-square test for contingency tables was performed (Petz, Kolesarić, Ivanec, Milas, Podlesek & Galić, 2012).

Five questions were designed to test the hypothesis for this research. The basic hypothesis of this research is that the methods used in the teaching of a foreign language in the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach. It is additionally assumed that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student.

Question 1. I improved my communicative skills in my English classes: Extremely, Very, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all.

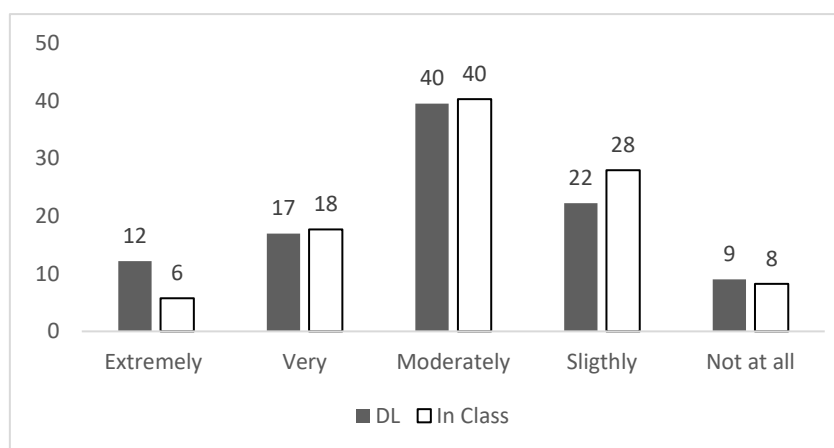


Figure 3.- Percentage Frequency Distribution of Answers to the Question on Improving Communicative Skills for DL and In Class Students

Figure 3 indicates the frequencies of responses to the question 1, expressed in percentages, for DL, and in-class students respectively. The figure demonstrates that the two distributions differ slightly in the way that 6% more DL students stated that they have improved the communicative skills extremely, and 6% more in-class students stated that they improved their communicative skills slightly. Chi-square test was also performed with a p-value of 0.0759.

Therefore, on the basis of the Chi-square test, it can be claimed that the answers on the improvement of communicative skills do not reflect a statistically significant difference.

As the responses of distance learning and in-class students to question 1 do not designate a statistically significant difference, this directly confirms the basic hypothesis of the research that the methods used in the teaching of a foreign language in the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach and implicitly confirms the secondary hypothesis of the research that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student.

Question 2. I improved my listening skills in my English classes: Extremely, Very, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all.

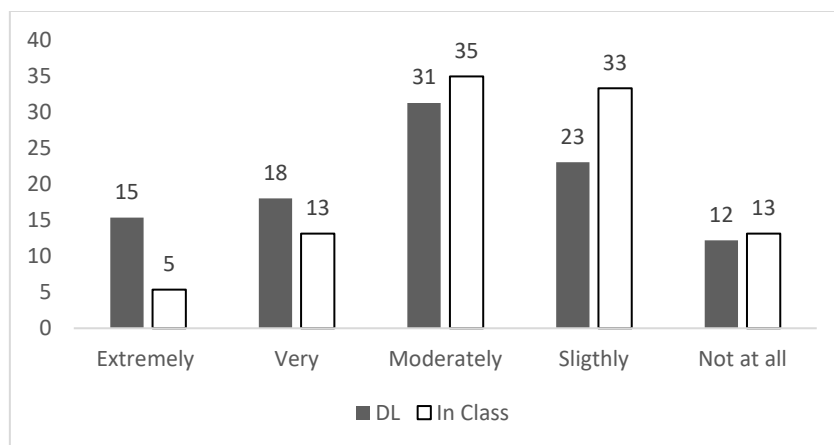


Figure 4- Percentage Frequency Distribution of Answers to the Question on Improving Listening Skills for DL and In Class Students

Figure 4 signifies the frequencies of answers to the question 2, expressed in percentages, for DL, and in-class students, respectively. It is noticeable that DL students rated their view of improving listening skills more positively than in-class students. 10% more DL students specified they improved their listening skills extremely, 5% more that they improved very, while 4%, 10% and 1% less, respectively, denoted they improved their listening skills moderately, slightly and not at all. A Chi-square test was also performed with a p-value of 0.0002, which means that DL and in-class students' responses to question 2 were statistically significantly different, with a significance threshold of 0.01.

As distance learning students reflected a more positive attitude towards the improvement of listening skills than in-class students, this directly confirms the basic hypothesis of the research that the methods employed in the teaching of a foreign language in

the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach. and implicitly confirms the secondary hypothesis of the research that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student

Question3. I improved my writing skills in my English classes: Extremely, Very, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all.

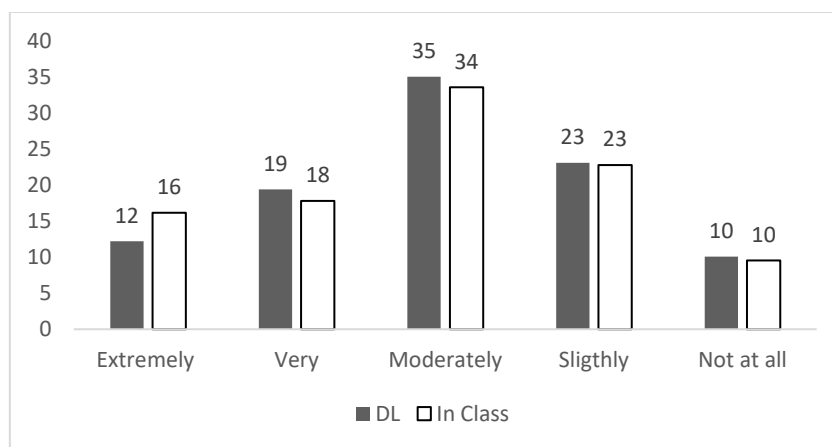


Figure 5- Percentage Frequency Distribution of Answers to the Question on Improving Writing Skills for DL and In Class Students

Figure 5 indicates the frequencies of responses to the question 3, demonstrated in percentages, for DL, and in-class students, respectively. The figure designates that the two distributions differ slightly in that 4% fewer DL students stated that they improved their writing skills extremely, while the other response modalities differ by 1% or do not differ. A Chi-square test was also performed with a p-value of 0.7346. Thus, on the basis of the Chi-square test, it can be claimed that the answers on the improvement of writing skills do not show a statistically significant difference.

As the responses of distance learning and in-class students to question 3 do not show statistically significant difference, this directly confirms the basic hypothesis of the research that the methods used in the teaching of a foreign language in the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach and implicitly confirms the secondary hypothesis of the research that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student.

Question 4. I improved my reading skills in my English classes: Extremely, Very, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all.

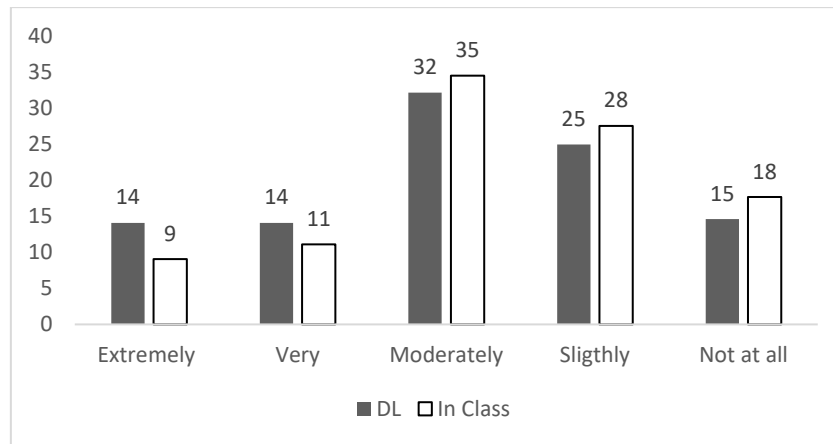


Figure 6- Percentage Frequency Distribution of Answers to the Question on Improving Reading Skills for DL and In Class Students

Figure 6 signifies the frequencies of responses to the question 4, identified in percentages, for DL, and in-class students, respectively. The figure shows that the two distributions differ slightly for 5% and 3%, respectively. More distance learning students stated that they improved extremely or very their reading skills, and by 3% less that they improved their reading skills moderately, slightly or not at all. A Chi-square test was also performed with a p-value of 0.2289. Thus, on the basis of the Chi-square test, it can be claimed that the answers on the improvement of reading skills do not show statistically significant difference.

As the answers of distance learning and in-class students to question 4 do not show statistically significant difference, this directly confirms the basic hypothesis of the research that the methods used in the teaching of a foreign language in the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach and implicitly confirms the secondary hypothesis of the research that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student.

Question 5. I improved my knowledge of grammar in my English classes: Extremely, Very, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all.

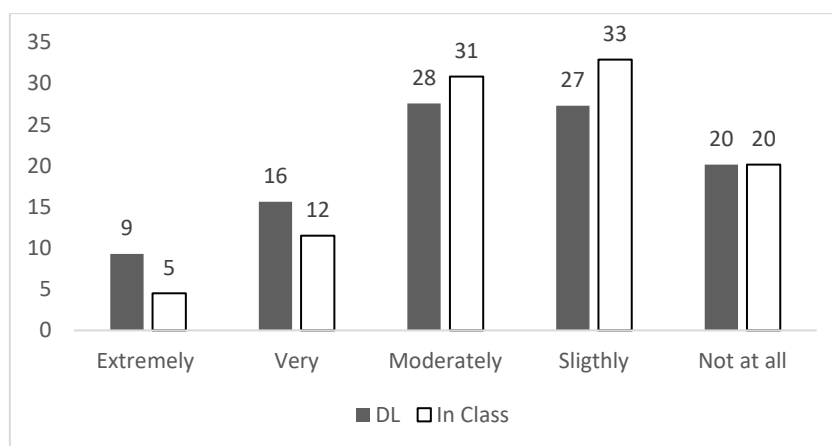


Figure 7- Percentage Frequency Distribution of Answers to the Question on Improving Knowledge of Grammar for DL and In Class Students

Figure 7 shows the frequencies of responses to question 5, specified in percentages, for distance learning, and in-class students, respectively. The graph shows that the two distributions differ slightly in the way that 4% more DL students stated that they had improved their knowledge of grammar extremely or very, while in-class students by 3% stated that they improved their knowledge of grammar moderately and 6% more that they improved a slightly. A Chi-square test was also performed with p-value of 0.0773 Thus, on the basis of the Chi-square test, it can be concluded that the answers to the question on the improvement of knowledge of grammar do not indicate a statistically significant difference.

As the responses of distance learning and in-class students to question 5 do not reflect a statistically significant difference, this directly confirms the basic hypothesis of the research that the methods employed in the teaching of a foreign language in the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach and implicitly confirms the secondary hypothesis of the research that the use of modern information and communication technologies in the process of teaching a foreign language in the distance education system can compensate for the lack of direct contact between the lecturer and the student.

Conclusion

Although the results of the research confirmed the hypothesis that the methods used in the teaching of a foreign language in the distance education system can be as effective as the methods applied within the classical teaching approach, there is always an opportunity for improvement. Both distance learning, and in-class students almost equally expressed their opinion that they believe they improved reading, writing, listening, communication, as well as

their knowledge of grammar in their English language courses. These results should not be completely depended on, as it is partly subjective assessment of the students' progress in the English language learning process. It should be also considered that students have distinct levels of English proficiency and different previous learning experiences. Students were initially highly motivated to study English as English proficiency is extremely important for their future profession in information and communication sector. However, support from teachers, progress evaluation careful guidance in the learning process are very crucial and must be carefully planned and implemented.

Corresponding to planning language skills development activities in the distance learning system, special attention must be paid to developing communicative skills, given the specific nature of this form of education due to the lack of face-to-face contact between teachers and students. Owing to the continuous development of information and communication technologies, various opportunities are provided which can adequately address the problem of lack of direct contact. In addition to the online lectures and seminars, which provide students with the opportunity to develop communicative skills to a certain extent, it is also possible to organize various audio or audio / video sessions through which students can orally present their work or assignments and participate in discussions on a particular topic. The role of teachers in such activities is very noteworthy, as it is necessary to adequately moderate and direct communication, as well as to motivate students to participate in such communicative activities. In the further development of the distance learning system, it is necessary to keep up with advances in information and communication technologies, but also to pay special attention to the pedagogical aspects and teaching methods in order to use the advantages and opportunities offered by modern technologies in an adequate way that will result in the development of skills required in today's society.

It can be concluded that in the distance learning system it is important to create appropriate predispositions to achieve the goal that is considered to be the greatest advantage of this type of teaching, i.e. developing skills for independent work and research and lifelong learning. In doing so, it is significant to take into account all advantages and disadvantages of distance learning systems, especially the absence of direct, face-to-face contact between participants throughout the teaching process. Carefully designed English language teaching materials, accompanied by appropriate and carefully planned forms and dynamics of interaction between participants in the distance learning system, as well as activities aimed at maintaining the necessary degree of students' motivation, exist as key elements which determine the degree of success and learning outcomes of the distance education learning process.

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