

Online foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic – teachers' perspective

Nauczanie zdalne w zakresie języków obcych
podczas pandemii COVID-19 z perspektywy nauczycieli

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Abstract

The pandemic that started in 2020 significantly influenced the situations of students and teachers, who stopped attending regular schools, with all classes happening online. Distant education itself transformed a lot, and the activities performed by teachers in autumn were definitely more advanced than those from the beginnings in spring. Teachers developed their ICT skills, and generally feel more comfortable teaching online. They notice some advantages of more systematic application of ICT and the distant form of education, however there are some drawbacks of it that cannot be easily overcome.

Keywords: distant education, ICT, digital tools

Streszczenie

Rozwój pandemii w roku 2020 znacznie zmienił sytuację nauczycieli i uczniów, którzy przestali uczęszczać do szkół, uczestnicząc w lekcjach prowadzonych zdalnie. Również sama forma edukacji zdalnej przeszła znaczną transformację, a działania realizowane przez nauczycieli jesienią były zdecydowanie bardziej zaawansowane niż w początkowym etapie wiosną. Nauczyciele rozwinęli swoje umiejętności w zakresie wykorzystania TIK, czując się swobodniej w nauczaniu zdalnym. Nauczyciele wskazują na pewne plusy częstszego wykorzystywania TIK

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oraz zdalnej formy edukacji, jednakże nie wszystkie z problemów z nią związanych mogą być rozwiązane.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja zdalna, TIK, narzędzia cyfrowe

1. Introduction

The school year 2019/2020 will definitely be the one remembered by everyone, especially by teachers, who faced the challenge of converting their teaching from the traditional classroom into the virtual environment almost overnight. This article is going to take an insight into distant education from the teachers' perspective, the processes teachers employed and the tools they used in order to handle the new situation, and the way teaching evolved because of the situation.



Source: <https://winkgo.com/67-teacher-memes/>

Before spring 2020 there were teachers who involved technology in their everyday teaching, there were others who used technology more or less often, and there were those who stuck to the traditional teaching, with printed resources only. Not only teachers' ICT skills differed but so did the availability of equipment and quality of internet connection. And spring 2020 brought teaching into the privacy of teachers' living rooms, kitchens and other places available for conducting online classes.

It is necessary to point out that, in most cases, teachers not only survived the challenge. They also developed their ICT skills, learned how to work in the new environments and how to make the most of the new situation. And the significant change between online education in spring 2020 and the one that took place in and after the autumn of 2020 could and has to be notified. In the spring teachers were experimenting and finding daily solutions in order to cope with the novelty situation. As Plebańska et al. (2021, p. 3) point out, the biggest challenges at the beginning of the pandemic involved the

accessibility of educational platforms and materials, ability for search for, modify and prepare online materials that would meet students' needs and be suited for the particular group of learners. The research conducted in the first half of 2020 by 'Dbam o mój zasięg' Foundation (Ptaszek at al., 2020, p. 23) reveals that 14% of teachers faced problems connected with the accessibility of equipment to conduct online classes, and almost 1/3 of teachers had to buy new devices. There were also problems resulting from poor quality of internet connection. Although at the beginning of distant education, 45% of teachers felt they were not really well prepared to teach online, by the end of the school year 2019/2020 as many as 90% of teachers were satisfied with their performance. At the same time, 52% of educators felt the need for extra training in conducting online lessons and using various digital tools (Ptaszek at al., 2020, p. 25).

Before the second period of online teaching, educators used their summer holidays well and were already better prepared for the autumn challenge. As the report prepared by 'Dbam o mój zasięg' Foundation shows, apart from buying new equipment, 28% of teachers invested in better internet connection, 86% had new software installed on their devices, 48% learned how to operate equipment they had not used before, and 87% of educators learned how to use different communication tools (Ptaszek at al., 2020, p. 26). This is the bright side of the situation. The dark one, as pointed out by Buchner and Wierzbicka (2020) shows that the work teachers did on adapting their teaching workshop and developing their online teaching skills was their own initiative and was not supported or encouraged by authorities. As the authoresses point out, teachers felt they were left with the task on their own and missed the constructive dialogue with educational decision makers.

2. The Research

2.1. Research aims

The following study addressed foreign language teachers in secondary schools in the north of Poland. The aim of the research was to look into the teachers' perspective on the process of teaching foreign languages to secondary school students through distant education. The special focus of the study was to notify the differences in teachers' approach, perspectives and experiences between the initial period of distant education in spring 2020 and its continuation in the autumn of the same year.

2.2. Research participants

The responses came from 42 foreign language teachers, teaching in secondary schools. Most of the participants were experienced teachers – more than three quarters of them (78.6%) have had at least 10 years' teaching experience, and 66.7% have taught for more than 20 years. Only 14.3% of the participants have taught in the school for the period shorter than 5 years. Vast majority of the responses (83.3%) came from the teachers of English, 4 other foreign languages gave the remaining 16.7% (7.1% for Spanish and German, 4.8% for Russian and 2.4% for another foreign languages).

2.3. Research description

The survey was conducted at the beginning of 2021, after the two periods of distant education, the first one in spring 2020 and the second one in autumn of the same year, both caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity for social isolation.

Teachers were expected to complete an online questionnaire, through a link they received via email. The questionnaire included 2 questions about the participants and 23 questions about the experience of online teaching in both periods of the year. Five of the questions required the participants to choose from the options given, the other 17 questions asked teachers to share their opinions. The final question asked for additional comments.

2.4. Presentation and discussion of research results

In the survey, the participants could express their opinion and share experience referring to teaching the foreign language online, the tools and applications they used, frequency and form of the classes, their ICT skills, the difficulties they experienced and the good points of online education they noticed.

Questions 3 and 4 addressed the frequency of online lessons in the form of video-meetings in spring (Figure 1) and in autumn 2020 (Figure 2). In spring over 45% of teachers taught all or almost all their lessons online, and a great majority (66.7%) taught at least half of their scheduled classes. In the autumn, the first number increased to 66.7%, and as many as 95.2% of the teachers questioned taught at least half of their scheduled classes. The number of teachers who did not teach any online lessons or who did that occasionally shrank from almost a quarter (23.8%) to only 2.4%, with all teachers teaching their lessons at least from time to time. In spring 7.1% of teachers did not teach online lessons at all.

42 responses

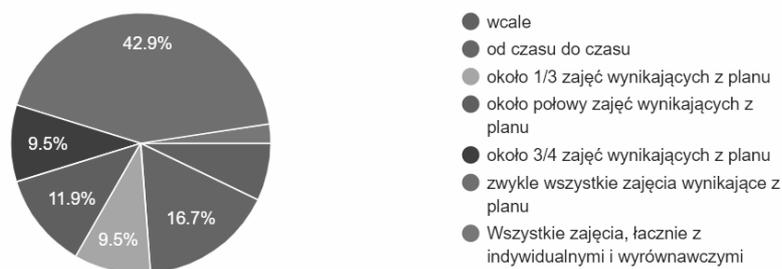


Figure 1. The frequency of online lessons in the form of video-meetings in spring 2020

42 responses

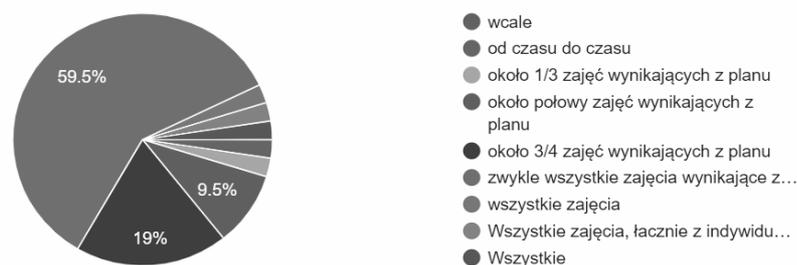


Figure 2. The frequency of online lessons in the form of video-meetings in autumn 2020

Question 5 asked about teachers' experience in the application of ICT before the pandemic (Figure 3). It is important to notice that although over a third of teachers (34.1%) regularly used ICT tools in their teaching, as many as 14.6% did not use it at all, and almost 1/5 (19.5%) referred to ICT only when it was absolutely necessary. That maintains a third of the teachers questioned. The numbers easily compare to the number of 33,4% teachers who taught only 1/3 or fewer of their scheduled lessons in the spring of 2020 (Figure 1). Having no experience in the use of ICT it was really difficult for them to enter distant education smoothly.

41 responses



Figure 3. The use of ICT in teaching before the pandemic of 2020

Questions 6 and 7 asked about the communication channels teachers used in spring (Figure 4) and in autumn 2020 (Figure 5). In the spring definitely there was more variety of channels, as especially at the beginning of the distant education there were not too many organized solutions, at teachers applied the channels they knew and that were available at that moment. Majority of teachers (61.9%) used MS Teams, as the software provided by schools, almost a third (31%) used met their students through ZOOM, and a quarter (26.2%) met through Google Classroom. There were also various forms of social media channels (Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp) and even channels used basically by gamers (Discord).

42 responses

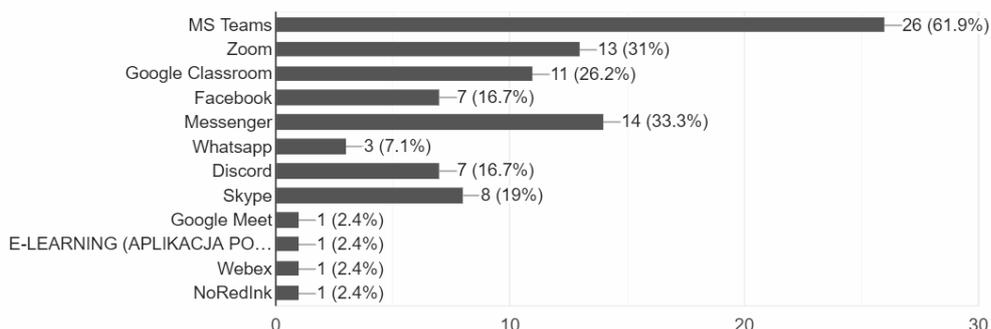


Figure 4. Communication channels used in spring 2020

The autumn period of distant education brought more organized approach: as many as 90.5% of teachers turned to MS Teams, followed by ZOOM (14.4%) and Google Classroom (11.9%). The number of teachers using Messenger and WhatsApp remained almost the same, as social media

played a supportive role in contacting the students and sharing information with them most effectively. The gaming channels disappeared from the communication between teachers and students, although students did use them to communicate with each other simultaneously with their online lessons (information shared by some students).

42 responses

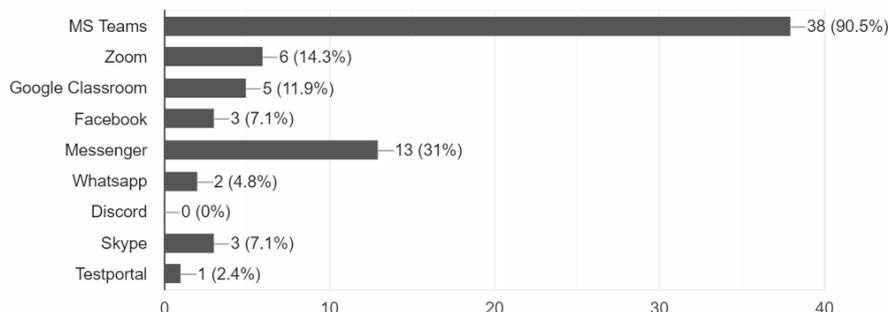


Figure 5. Communication channels used in autumn 2020

Questions 8, 9 and 10 asked about online applications teachers used with their students to teach vocabulary before the pandemic, in the spring and in the autumn of 2020 (Figure 6 and Table 1). The improvement in both the frequency and the range of online applications can easily be noticed. Before the pandemic, 21.43% of teachers did not use any online applications to support learning vocabulary, and the number decreased to 14.29% in autumn 2020, when half of the teachers used online applications often or frequently. This is more than doubling the number from before the pandemic (21.43%).

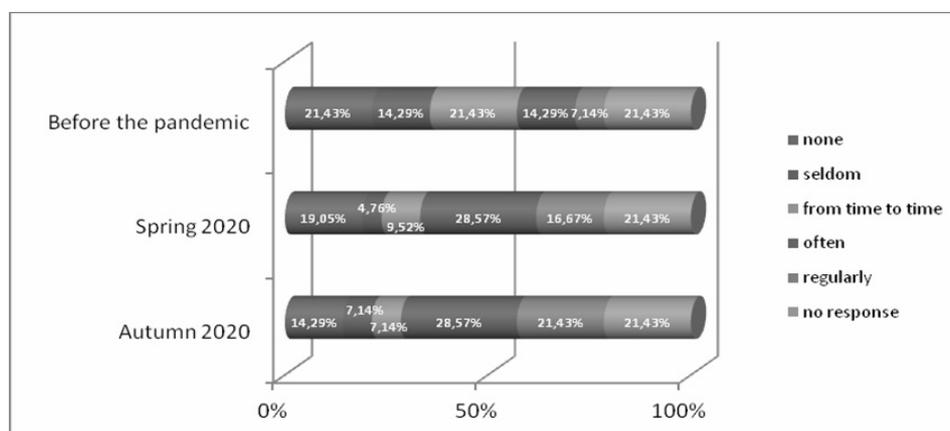


Figure 6. The frequency of the use of online applications to teach vocabulary before and during the pandemic

Also, the range of online applications teachers used before the pandemic slightly increased in spring and then more than doubled in autumn 2020 (Table 1). It can clearly be noticed that teachers used the time of their summer holidays to develop their ICT skills and find solutions to help their students learn successfully in the time of distant education. In their answers, some teachers point out that they not only used the applications more often but they also used the opportunity of organizing virtual classes on the platform to be able to monitor their students' involvement and progress they were making.

Before the pandemic	Spring 2020	Autumn 2020
Instaling	Instaling	Instaling
Quizlet	Wordwall	Wordwall
Quizizz	Quizlet	Quizlet
Learning apps	Quizizz	Quizizz
Kahoot	Learning apps	Learning apps
Slideshare	Kahoot	Liveworksheets
iSLCollective	Slideshare	Edpuzzle
British Council	iSLCollective	Bamboozle
	Youtube	Genially
	British Council	Kahoot
	Bamboozle	Slideshare
		iSLCollective
		Youtube
		AnswerGarden
		Lingos
		Skribbl
		British Council
		Bamboozle

Table 1. The types of online applications used to teach vocabulary before and during the pandemic

Questions 11, 12 and 13 asked about the quizzes used by teachers with their students before the pandemic, in the spring and in the autumn of 2020 (Figure 7). Before the pandemic, the quizzes teachers used were basically limited to Kahoot, Quizizz and Quizlet, occasionally supported by WordWall. In the spring of 2020 the same quizzes were used more extensively, more teachers discovered the benefits of WordWall, and Teams-based Forms were used. In the autumn period of distant education teachers also used less popular applications, such as Baamboozle, Skribbl, gamestolearnenglish or Test Portal.

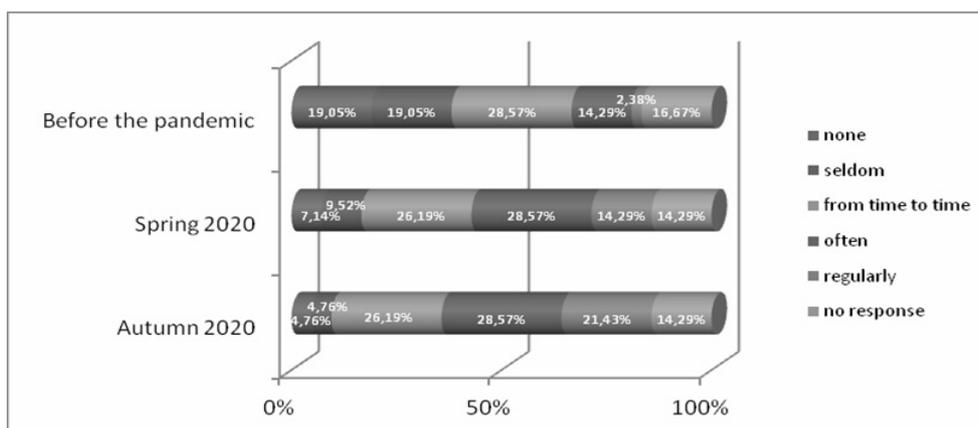


Figure 7. The frequency of the use of quizzes before and during the pandemic

Similarly to the application of online application to learn vocabulary, significant increase in the use of quizzes can be noticed. Before the pandemic, as many as 1/5 of the teachers questioned (19.05%) did not use any quizzes during their lessons. This number shrank to only 4.7% in autumn 2020, with half of the teachers using quizzes in their lessons on regular basis. The number of teachers using quizzes often or regularly before the pandemic was only 16.63%, and in the spring of 2020 it already more than doubled, reaching the level of 42.86%. The number of teachers who use quizzes from time to time remained at more or less the same level (26.19-28.57%), however the groups in the three different periods do not consist of the same teachers.

Questions 14, 15 and 16 addressed the use of audio materials before and during the pandemic. Here, the participants used the audio recordings frequently in all three periods analyzed, there are no significant differences in the frequency that can be observed. However, the difference is in the range and quality of the audio recordings (Figure 8). Before the pandemic, majority of the teachers questioned (61.9%) limited the audio recordings to the ones offered by the course book. This number decreased to 50% in the spring and then to only 35.71% in the autumn of 2020. Actually, it can be concluded that before the pandemic only a third of language teachers used the non-course book audio materials, while in the autumn a third did not take advantage of the audio materials available online. The change is especially important as because of the shift, students were able to listen to more authentic materials, which are not usually provided by course books.

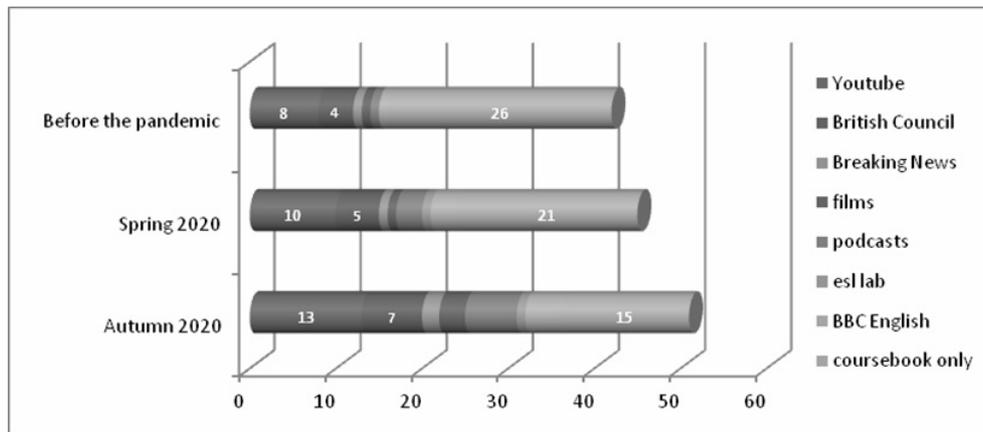


Figure 7. The frequency of the use of quizzes before and during the pandemic

In questions 17, 18 and 19 teachers reflected on the audio-visual materials used before and during the pandemic. Similarly to the audio materials, teachers frequently use them, both in traditional classroom and in distant education. There were no significant differences in the types of materials used – the most popular tool is YouTube, teachers also use educational sites, such as BBC, British Council and TED Talks. Watching films also seems to be a popular activity. The only significant difference that has to be pointed out is the number of teachers who do not use other materials than those offered by the course book: Before the pandemic its is 45.24% of the respondents, in the spring the number drops to 28.57%, and in autumn 2020 it decreases to only 14.29%.

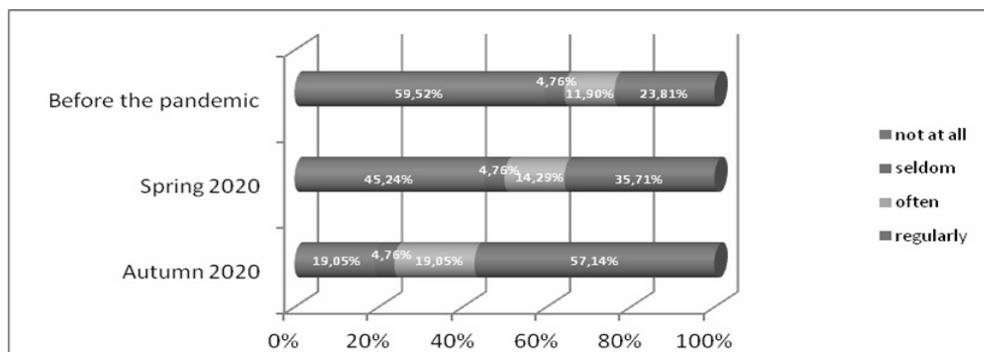


Figure 8. The frequency of the use of online course books before and during the pandemic

The final set of three questions (20, 21 and 22) referred to the use of online course books (Figure 8). Here the change was most significant, as before the pandemic only a third of teachers (35.71%) used the online course book often or regularly, and a great majority (59.52%) did not use this option at all. In the spring, the number of teachers not using online course books decreased by over 14%, still leaving 45% of teachers and their students without the advantages offered by online course books. At that time, the number of teachers using the tool frequently increased to 50%. The trend continued, and in the autumn the proportions from before the pandemic more than reversed, with as many as three quarters of teachers (76.19%) taking advantage of online versions of their teaching materials, and only 19.05% of teachers who did not use the tool at all.

In response to questions 23 and 24 teachers noted the problems they faced in the spring and autumn periods of distant education (Figure 9). The data below shows that teachers dealt well with the problems that appeared at the beginning of the pandemic. Problems with Internet connection, problems with equipment or applications and teaching materials were solved by majority of respondents. As mentioned before, teachers used their summer holidays well in order to get ready for the continuation of distant education. Actually, the only problem that remained at more or less the same level (58.5% in spring and 52.6% in autumn) was the feeling of isolation. This shows that being isolated is not the condition human beings are prepared to be in and what we need is the human touch in every sphere of our lives, including education.

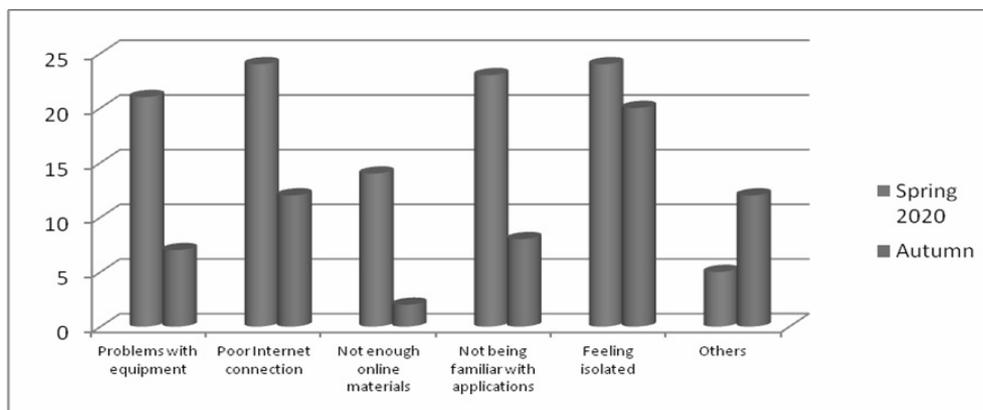


Figure 9. Problems connected with online education in the spring and autumn of 2020

It is also interesting that more teachers pointed to other problems during the autumn period than the spring one. In the spring, teachers struggled with such problems as:

- speaking to the 'black screen',
- not being able to see their students,
- not working microphones,
- being left alone with the new situation,
- no real contact with students,
- parents' interference,
- bigger workload than in the traditional school.

The problems mentioned in the spring reappear in the question about the autumn period. Teachers also point out to problems with:

- students' motivation,
- lack of control over what the students are actually doing during the online lessons,
- too short lesson time,
- no real interaction and the human aspects of education,
- problems with students not understanding the lesson, teachers not being able to notice that through their body language and respond according to the situation,
- problems with equipment and the situation at some students' homes that makes the participation in online lessons and learning in general difficult,
- uncontrolled absences.

It is worth noticing that the teachers responding to the questionnaire focus to a great extent to the problems students experience, showing empathy and understanding of the hardships they go through. Teachers do not get into the 'complaining mode' but rather try to understand that the situation might be overwhelming for some students. Some teachers also stated that they did not experience any problems in the autumn period of distant education, and others who just expressed their desire to come back to the real teaching in the schools.

The final question (25) asked about the advantages of distant education (Figure 10). Although there was a number of teachers who state there are no advantages of distant education (19.05%), majority notice some obvious benefits. More than a quarter (28.57%) of the teachers questioned pointed to the fact that their ICT skills definitely improved thanks to distant education, and almost a quarter (23.81%) use a wider range of applications in their

teaching. This is an obvious advantage, as online tools increase student motivation and involvement in the lessons. Other teachers (21.43%) valued the easy access to teaching materials and resources, and especially the convenient way of sharing them with their students.

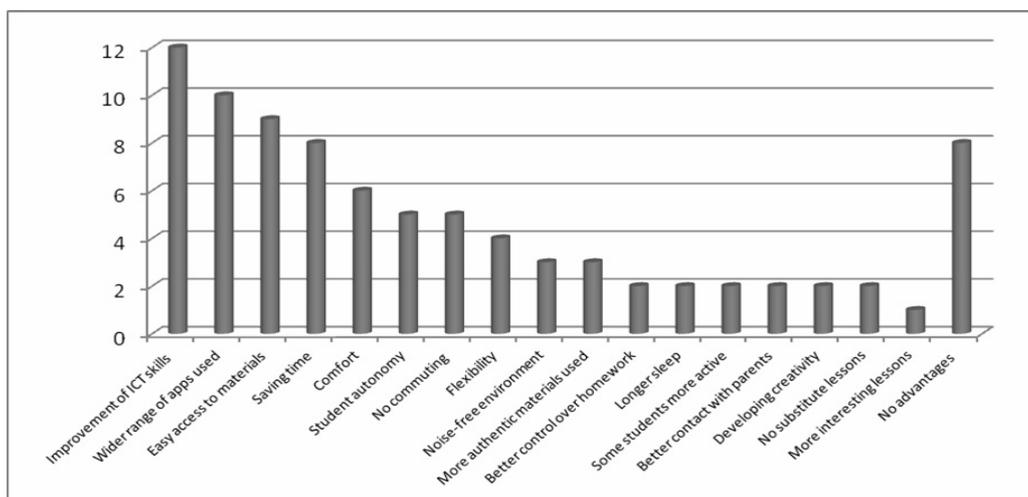


Figure 10. Advantages of online education

A couple of teachers appreciated the advantages connected with the organization of teaching from home – saving time (19.05%), comfort connected with staying at home (14.29%), no commuting (11.9%), flexibility (9.52%), working in the noise-free environment (7.14%) and longer sleep (4.76%) resulting from a possibility to work from home, often in your pyjama bottoms.

Some teachers also pointed to the advantages for student development – 11.9% of the respondents notice that distant education develops student autonomy and allow them to take over the responsibility for their own learning. Teachers were also able to use more authentic materials, and some say that the control over students' homework was easier while working online. Some teachers noticed that there were students who became more active than in traditional classroom, and the contact with parents was more effective.

2.5. Research limitations

Although the survey covered a representative number of teachers of different languages, the ones who were questioned were those who can be contacted online. Teachers who struggled with online education most might not have been willing to respond to the questionnaire.

Another limitation resulted from the structure of the questionnaire. The intention of the research was not to impose or suggest any answers when referring to the applications used by teachers before and during the pandemic. This resulted in a number of open questions, and some teachers were not too explicit in their answers. Also, the questions required the respondents to compare their online activities in three periods of time, there is some space for subjectivity in the interpretation of these activities.

3. Conclusions and further implications

The survey shows that no matter whether language teachers are excited about the use of technology or treat it as the necessarily evil, they have all made significant progress in the use of ICT, the range of online application they use increased and they have definitely developed their skills in this area. This has brought them a bit closer to the language Generation Z communicates in, limiting the distance between generations a little. The results show the highest level of advancement in ICT skills between the spring and autumn periods, which indicates that teachers took the responsibility for the quality of distant education in their own hands, working on the development of their technological skills during their summer holidays.

Another interesting point is that the answers given by teachers show the diversity of perspectives – the same aspects of the distant education reality were perceived by some teachers as drawback and by others as assets. This was the case with the cooperation with parents, when some teachers noticed that parental involvement was a problem, and others appreciated better contact with them. Similarly, some teachers expressed the opinion that homework was easier to control in distant education, on the other hand a few others express the concern just about the effectiveness of homework done online, and point out to the fact that checking student homework was really a time consuming process. The time is another issue that was perceived differently by various teachers – some of them appreciate no need of commuting, resulting in a possibility of longer sleep and saving time, other teachers express the complaints about the extensive time spent in front of their computer screens and on preparations of materials that had to be converted from the traditional form into a digital one.

There are some common points for the majority of the teachers – with the feeling of isolation and missing the real contact with the students in the lead. This reflects the true nature of education: sharing subject knowledge is just one aspect of it, we all need the human touch of the process. Teachers are

not happy talking to the black screens, with just the icons of the students taking part in the lesson. And it is not because they want to control or impose things on the students – it is because the body language and facial expression of the student gives us instant feedback whether the student is following what is being explained. And with no such clues teachers are at a loss with no instant feedback from the students.

The new skills teachers have developed since the start of the pandemic are definitely going to stay with us even when we are back to traditional classroom. Teachers are probably going to use more ICT tools, some even suggest the idea of continuous use of educational platforms like Teams to assist in students' individual work at home. On the other hand, as some of the teachers taking part in the research still express problems with using ICT, there is need for more systematic and organized help that will reach not only teacher who look for development opportunities on their own, but also the ones who are more reluctant to do so.

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