

# Students' motivation in distant education

Motywacja uczniów w nauczaniu zdalnym

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## Abstract

Students' motivation directly influences their involvement in learning and the results they achieve. The teaching-learning process should include activities that address not only extrinsic factors, but also strengthen students' intrinsic motivation, and reflect the dynamic character of the phenomenon. The research conducted illustrates students' motivation to learn English in the period of distant education and their perception of learning particular aspect of the language.

**Keywords:** motivation, distant education, language skills

## Streszczenie

Motywacja uczniów bezpośrednio przekłada się na ich zaangażowanie oraz uzyskiwane efekty uczenia się. W procesie dydaktycznym można zorganizować działania tak, aby nie tylko wykorzystywać elementy motywacji zewnętrznej, ale też wzmacniać motywację wewnętrzną u uczniów, uwzględniając jednocześnie dynamiczny charakter motywacji. Przeprowadzone badanie pokazuje, jak kształtowała się motywacja uczniów do nauki języka angielskiego w czasie nauki zdalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** motywacja, nauczanie zdalne, umiejętności językowe

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## 1. Introduction

The question of students' motivation to learn the language and do the tasks has always been an important issue, and it has become even more significant now, in distant education, when students are left on their own not only with mastering the knowledge and skills teachers want them to learn, but also with keeping the level of motivation at such a level to attend lessons and make learning possible.

In order to understand the concept, it is essential agree on its definition. According to Cambridge Dictionary, motivation means "willingness to do something, or something that causes such willingness". This can be understood as the drive or impulse which makes students do something, as well as the factor that evokes this kind of desire. Motivation is the power that makes us act, and on the other hand, lack of motivation will result in the opposite – lack of activity and passiveness. Taking the psychological perspective, Stangor and Walinga (2014) explain how motivation affects our behaviour. They shed some light on the relationship between drives and goals as the motives behind motivation, proposing that

drives, which are internal states that are activated when the physiological characteristics of the body are out of balance, and goals, which are desired end states that we strive to attain. Motivation can thus be conceptualised as a series of behavioural responses that lead us to attempt to reduce drives and to attain goals by comparing our current state with a desired end state. (Stangor and Walinga, 2014: 466)

Chelly (2020) understands motivation as 'the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors', she also notices its complexity, pointing out the involvement of 'the biological, emotional, social, and cognitive forces that activate behaviour'. Dörnyei (2001) explains that motivation is 'a dynamic factor that is in a continuous process of evolution and change according to the various internal and external influences the learner is exposed to', Frith (2009) interprets it as 'the internal drive directing behaviour towards some end', and Nevid (2013) as 'factors that activate, direct, and sustain goal-directed behaviour'. He explains that 'motives are the "whys" of behavior – the needs or wants that drive behavior and explain what we do'. Deci and Ryan (2000: 54) summarise that 'to be motivated means to be moved to do something' and further explain that 'someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated'. And Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) point out to the relevance of motivation in goal achievement, saying that

without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals (...). On the other hand, high motivation can make up for considerable deficiencies both in one's language aptitude and learning conditions. (Dörney and Ryan, 2015: 72)

Being a complex phenomenon, motivation varies not only at the level of intensity and duration, there can also be different types and constituents of motivation. Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010) distinguish between three components of motivation: activation, persistence and intensity. Chelly (2020) further explains that activation refers to the decision initiating a behaviour leading to the goal, persistence addresses 'the continued effort' that helps to achieve it, and intensity involves 'the concentration and vigor that goes into pursuing a goal'. Frith (2009) points out that 'the motivation to learn is personal and comes from within an individual, but can be influenced by external factors.

This brings out the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Woodworth, 1918; White, 1959; Deci and Ryan, 1985; Bandura, 1986; Stipek, 1996; Williams and Burden, 1997; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Dörney, 2001; Dörney and Ryan, 2015). Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, Woodworth (1918:70) distinguished between intrinsic motivation as the 'activity running by its own drive', when you are involved in an activity because you want to be involved in it and it gives you sufficient satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation as the one 'driven by some extrinsic motive', when you become involved in doing something because of positive or negative external stimuli. Deci and Ryan (2000: 55) point out that because of the intrinsic motivation we do things which are 'inherently interesting or enjoyable', whereas extrinsic one makes us do something which 'leads to a separable income'. They also notice that 'the quality of experience and performance can be very different when one is behaving for intrinsic versus extrinsic reasons' (ibid.: 55). What is more, Deci and Ryan show 'how one's motivation for behaviour can range from amotivation or unwillingness, to passive compliance to active personal commitment' (ibid.: 60) and achieve higher quality performance (Figure 1). The authors determine the processes which are connected with the consecutive depths of motivational involvement. Students who are amotivated will present perceived non-contingency, low perceived competence, non-relevance and non-intentionality. Learners who act upon external motivation in the simplest form controlled by external regulation show salience of extrinsic rewards or punishments and compliance and reactance. External motivation in the form of introjection results in

students' ego involvement and their focus on approval from self and/or others, and in the form of identification will produce conscious valuing of activity and self-endorsement of goals. External motivation which is closest to the internal one, driven by integration, results in hierarchical synthesis of goals and congruence. And finally, internal motivation itself brings out students' interest, enjoyment and inherent satisfaction with the activities performed.

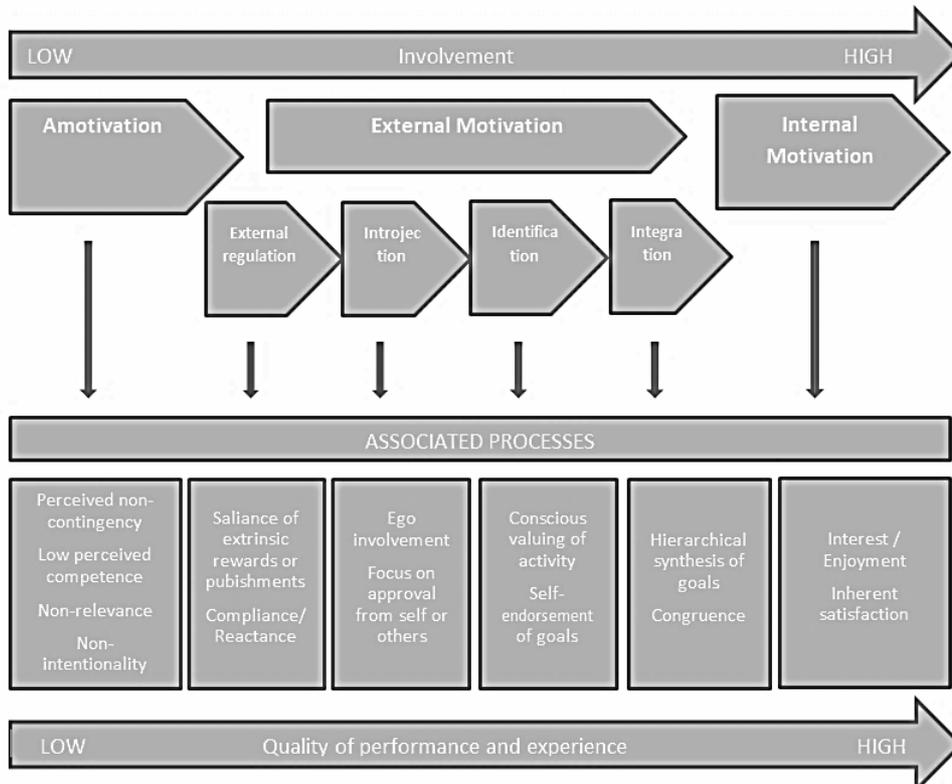


Figure 1. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and their associated processes, based on Deci and Ryan (2000: 61)

It is also important to notice the dynamic nature of motivation. Gardner's (1985) perspective presented in the socio-cultural model, when motivation is perceived as 'a static individual difference variable within a modular framework is now replaced with the understanding of its flexibility and 'prominent temporal dimension' (Waninge et al. 2014: 707). Dörney and Ottó (1998) describe three stages case-and-effect relationship of students' motivation to learn the language: a pre-action phase, an actional phase and a post-actional

phase. The first one involves motivation to initiate and activity, the second phase deals with the level of motivation maintained while performing and activity, and the final stage refers to the retrospection and evaluation.

Other researchers draw attention to the fact that motivations are closely related to emotions, and 'an emotion is a mental and physiological feeling state that directs our attention and guides our behaviour' (Stangor and Walinga, 2014). The authors notice that

a motivation is a driving force that initiates and directs behaviour. Some motivations are biological, such as the motivation for food, water, and sex. But there are a variety of other personal and social motivations that can influence behaviour, including the motivations for social approval and acceptance, the motivation to achieve, and the motivation to take, or to avoid taking, risks (...). In each case we follow our motivations because they are rewarding. (Stangor and Walinga, 2014: 466)

And the understanding of motivation in its emotional nature is of crucial importance for educators. As both emotions and motivation are temporary and dynamic phenomena, motivation can't be treated as the given, permanent feature of a language learner. On the contrary, being so closely connected to emotions, it constantly fluctuates, and even a learner who presents a certain level of intrinsic motivation needs the teacher's support in order to keep it at the equally high level. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) highlight the dynamic character and temporal aspect of motivation:

Even during a single language class, one can notice that L2 motivation shows a certain amount of changeability, and in the context of learning an L2 for several months or years, or over a lifetime, motivation is expected to go through rather diverse phases. From this perspective, motivation is not seen as a static attribute of the individual but rather as a dynamic factor that displays continuous fluctuation as it is adapted to the ever-changing parameters of the context. (Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015: 84)

Taking this dynamic perspective on motivation into consideration, any change in the form of education, whether it is the change of the school, the teacher, of the form of giving instruction, might affect students' motivation to learn the language. The situation experienced by both teachers and students in the first half of the year 2020 is definitely the kind of experience that could affect students' motivation.

It is important to notice that the situation was a new one for both students and teachers. Before we were forced to switch to distance education and teach exclusively through the use of technology, teachers could be divided

into three general groups: group one consisting of the ones who incorporated ICT in their regular teaching practises; group two including the ones who occasionally turned to ICT but were not real fans of widespread application of technology, and group three – the teachers who rejected ICT and followed the traditional teaching processes.

Previously, there were also some discussions among school officials on whether the use of technology, internet and smartphones at schools should be restricted. In case of a few schools, even a complete ban on mobile devices was introduced, and most schools did not offer a Wi-Fi internet connection for their students. And suddenly in March the situation changes 180°: before March you couldn't bring your phone to school, and now you have the school in your phone.

Teachers faced a difficult task of converting their teaching procedures from the traditional classroom into the virtual reality almost overnight, which posed a huge challenge for everyone. And whereas the teachers who had some experience with ICT at least knew where to start, the task was really daunting for those who avoided technology-based activities in their teaching before March.

Students were expected to deal with the switch to technology in a smooth way, as being the representatives of Generation Z, they are supposed to find the virtual classroom a friendly environment. However, this appeared to be a false pre-assumption, as many students did not cope successfully with the technical obstacles they encountered, and some even disappeared from education. There are no official numbers from the Government, but it could be as many as a couple thousands of students in Poland.

The situation being new for everyone, both students and teachers had to face the challenges connected with learning and teaching from homes, sometimes with limited equipment options, not to mention no prior preparation or possibility to ask someone for help or assistance.

All teachers know it is difficult to keep students focused and preserve their motivated to work on their language skills in the real classroom at a high level over an extended period of time. In distance education the mission seems even harder, especially in the situation in which educators feel far from comfortable and constantly struggle with organisational and technical constraints, and student's attendance in the lessons remains mainly their and their parents' responsibility.

## **2. The research**

### **2.1. Research aims**

The following study aims at taking a look into the process of teaching English to secondary school students through distant education during the spring 2020 pandemic. The specific aim is having an insight into students' motivation to learn the language and the effect of the online classes on maintaining or losing this motivation.

### **2.2. Research participants**

373 secondary school students from the north of Poland took part in the survey. More than half of them (56,6%) of them were first graders, 23% attended second grade, and 20,3 f grade three. Majority of the students taking part in the research (48,5%) learn English in the extended programme, 38,8% go through the basic program, and 12,2% attend bilingual classes.

### **2.3. Research description**

The survey was conducted after a two-month experience of distant education, in the second part of May and in June 2020. Students were supposed to complete an online questionnaire, through a link they got from their English teachers. The questionnaire included 23 questions about students' perception of distant education. 14 questions required students to mark their response on 1-6 scale. In 6 questions, they were supposed to choose only one answer from the cafeteria, and in 3 others to mark all matching responses. Additionally, in 6 out of the total number of questions students were allowed to add their own responses. The questionnaire also included three questions concerning the participants and their school programme.

### **2.4. Presentation and discussion of research results**

In the survey, the participants could express their opinion and share experience referring to the quality and the form of distant education, communication with their English teachers, their own motivation to learn the language, the interest in the classes, the level of task difficulty and the possibility to work on different language skills in online classes.

In the first question, students were asked to evaluate the quality of online education they experienced in spring 2020 (Figure 2). Out of 372 students who took part in the survey, almost three quarters (73.1%) expressed at least moderate satisfaction with online teaching. 7.8% of the participants were

highly satisfied with distant classes, 36.3% marked 5 and 6 on the 1-6 scale, and only 3% expressed their extreme dissatisfaction.

372 responses

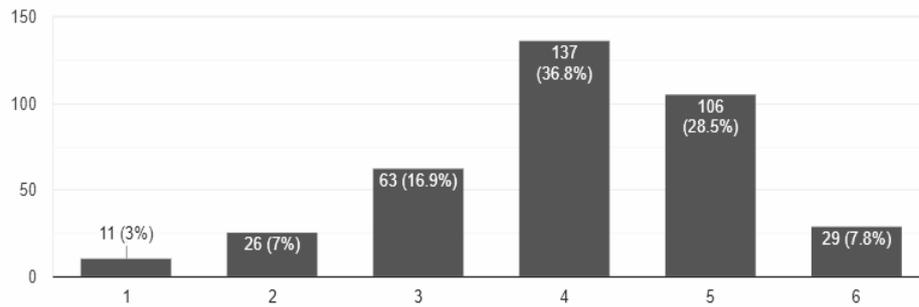


Figure 2. The evaluation of quality of distant education (1 – hopeless, 6 – excellent).

Question two asked students about the forms of instruction used in distant teaching. Students were given a cafeteria to choose from, they could also add their response (Figure 3). More than three quarters indicated they were assigned to do work in the form of worksheets and exercises (77.5%) and had online lessons with their teachers (75.4%). More than half of the students also took part in online quizzes (56.6%), and almost half of them (43.1%) took online tests. A little more than a quarter of the participants also used educational platforms (27.4%). As other forms of instructions students' names working with the coursebook and the workbook, and tasks focused on writing skills, reading comprehension and speaking. A few students also remarked that they were left with work to do and little or no support from their teachers (1.4%).

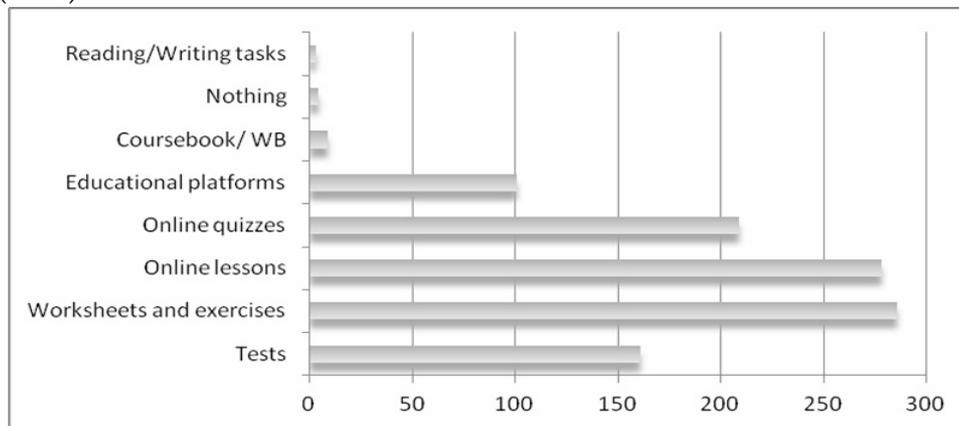


Figure 3. Forms of instruction used in distant education.

In questions four and five students evaluated the quality of communication with their English teachers (Figure 4) and compared it with the communication in the traditional classroom (Figure 5). A great majority (81.2%) stated that they communicated with their English teacher well or very well, and only 6.8% of survey participants expressed a negative opinion on the quality of communication. It is also worth noticing that almost 12% of students think that communication with their English teachers was more successful in distant education than in the traditional classroom. About one third of students (33.6%) still think that communication in the traditional classroom is easier. About half of the students (47.2%) evaluated that they communicated well with their language teachers no matter whether it was distant education or traditional classroom.

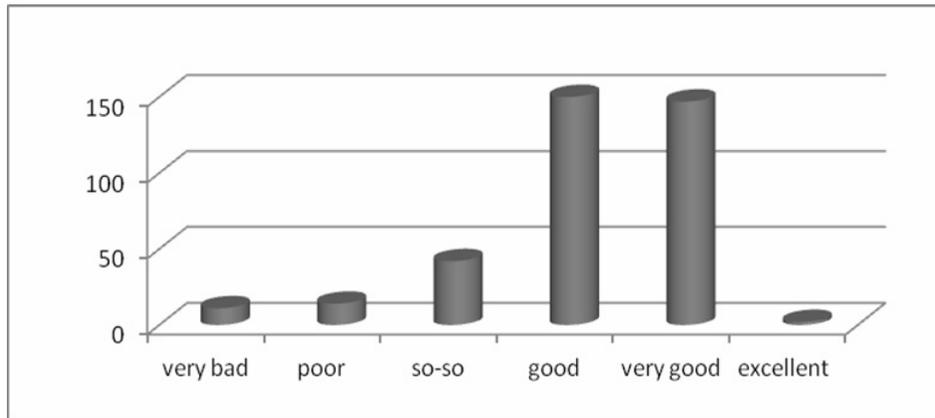


Figure 4. Communication with the language teacher in distant education.

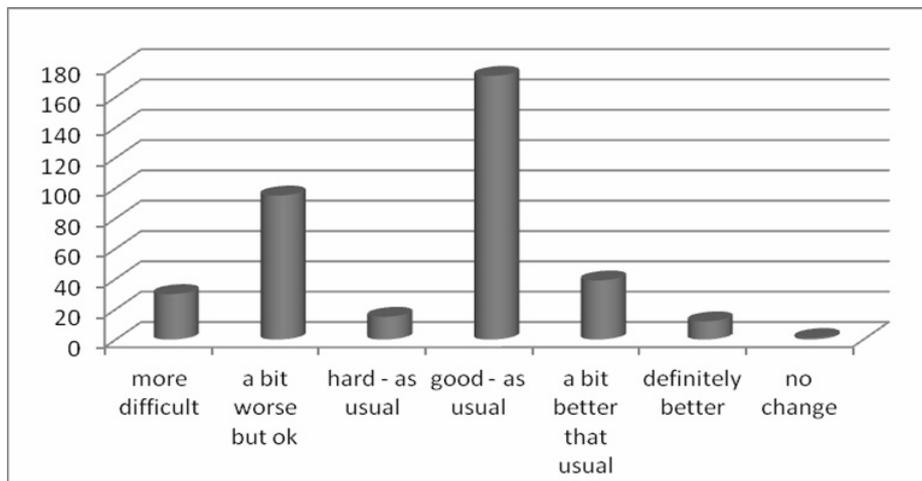


Figure 5. Comparing the communication with the language teacher in distant communication with traditional classroom instruction.

Questions three, six and seven addressed directly students' motivation to learn the language in the traditional classroom and in online education (Figure 6). The results show that students seem to be generally better motivated in the traditional model of education, when only 3.5% of the participant marked their motivation at the lowest level, comparing to 10.5% in the online instruction. Also, the number of students who think their motivation is at the highest level in the traditional model of education is almost twice as high (12.6%) than in online education (7%).

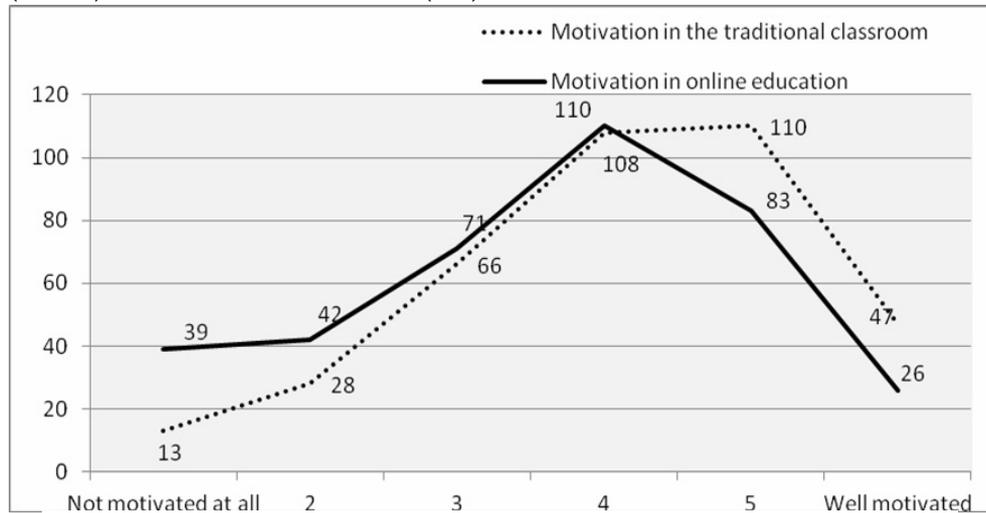


Figure 6. Student motivation in online education and in the traditional classroom.

Questions 8-12 asked about students' perception of the level of difficulty (Figure 7), their interest (Figure 8), understanding (Figure 9), remembering (Figure 10) and consistency in learning (Figure 11), compared to traditional education.

In students' opinion, the tasks were generally a little easier to do than in the traditional classroom (Figure 7). 6.2% of the participants found them much easier, while only 2.7% went for the other extreme. Majority of the students (72.6%) went for the two middle options, indicating that the tasks they were supposed to do online and in the traditional classroom were at a similar level of difficulty.

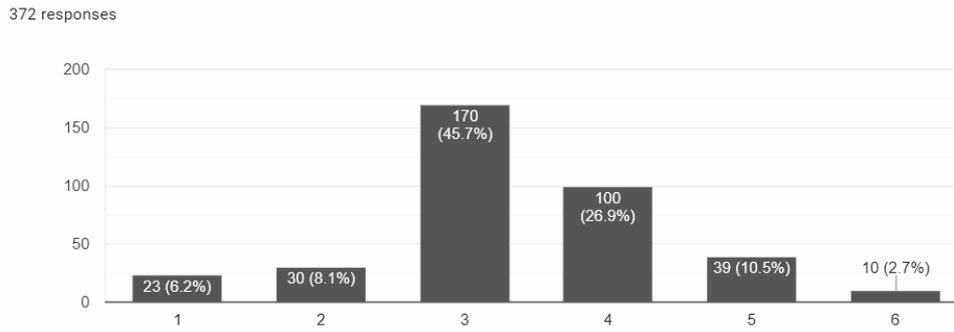


Figure 7. The level of difficulty of the tasks in distant education compared to traditional classroom (1 – easy, 6 – difficult).

It was also a bit more difficult for students to remain interested in the lessons happening online – 51.1% chose options 1-2-3 (Figure 8). Also, the extreme negative answer maintains 11.9% of the students, and the extreme positive one only 3.5%. Options 1-2 were chosen by 26.8% of the participants, while the sum of options 5-6 gives only 17.6%. A little more than half of the students (55.7%) went for the two middle options, indicating similar interest in online classes to the ones conducted in the traditional form.

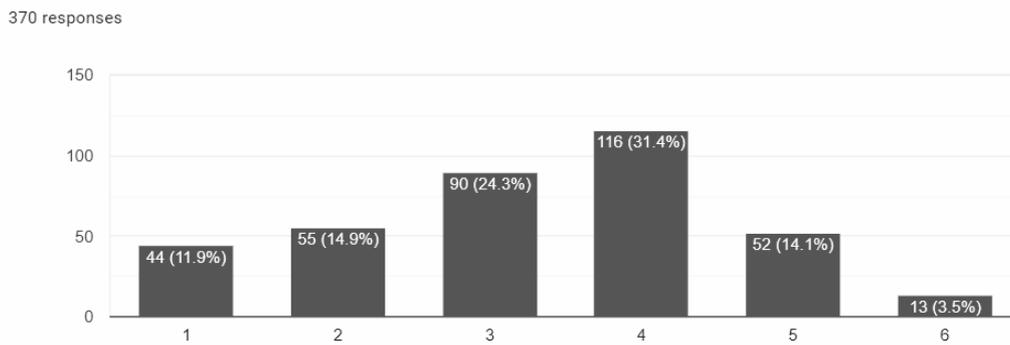


Figure 8. The level of interest in distant education compared to traditional classroom (1 – less, 6 – more).

Students' answers show that understanding of the material presented in distant education is at about the same level than in the traditional mode (Figure 9). Although 51.4% of the students chose options 1-2-3, the number of students who opted for the two extreme negative answers is 16.7%, while those who marked answers 5 and six maintain 18.8% of the participants. The two middle

answers, indicating a similar level of understanding, were chosen by 64.5% of the students.

372 responses

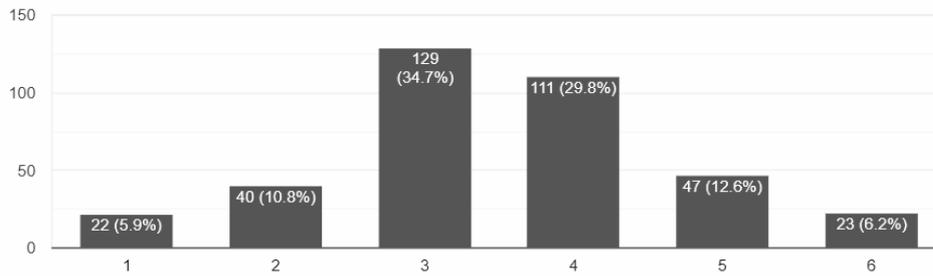


Figure 9. The level of understanding in distant education compared to traditional classroom (1 – less, 6 – more)

Remembering information seemed to be more of a problem in distant education (Figure 10). 57.9% of the participants chose answers 1-2-3, indicating it was more difficult for them to remember information that in the traditional classroom. However, the discrepancy between the two extreme answers is also more that significant – 9.7% students stated it was definitely more difficult for them to remember things, while 4.8% expressed the opposite opinion. The two middle answers, indicating a similar level of remembering, were chosen by 54.9% of the students.

372 responses

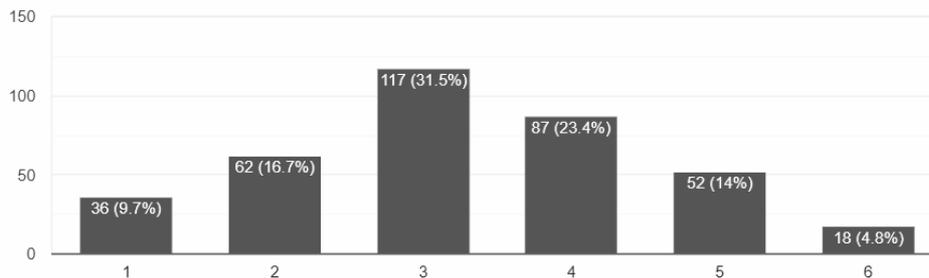


Figure 10. The level of remembering in distant education compared to traditional classroom (1 – less, 6 – more).

When consistency in language learning is concerned, 51.8% of students think it is easier for them to be consistent in distant education than in the traditional classroom (Figure 11). And although the two middle answers, indicating similar attitude, were chosen by 47.3%, there is more discrepancy in the extreme

answers. 9.7% students think it was more difficult for them to do work on time, while 13.7% express the opposite opinion.

372 responses

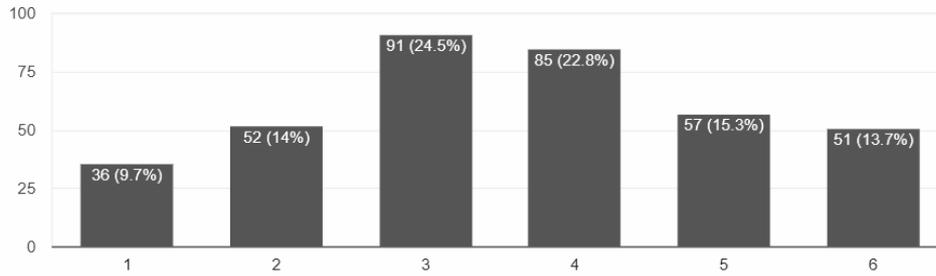


Figure 11. Students' consistency in learning in distant education compared to traditional classroom (1 – less, 6 – more).

Questions 13 and 14 addresses the factors that motivate students in the traditional education and in the online model (Figure 12). Students indicate the intrinsic factors that are their strongest motivators both in the classroom and in distant education. However, both intrinsic motives are slightly lower in distant education: the number decreases from 84% to 72.1% for the usefulness of English, and from 70.4% to 58.3% for the ability to communicate. When extrinsic factors are considered, parental influence remains at a similar level, but the influence of teacher's encouragement and interest in the lessons diminish in distant education from 23.4 % to 15.7% and from 30.2% to 25.7% respectively. The only motivating factor that is noticeably higher in distant education is the grade. Its importance raises from 58.4% to 63.1%.

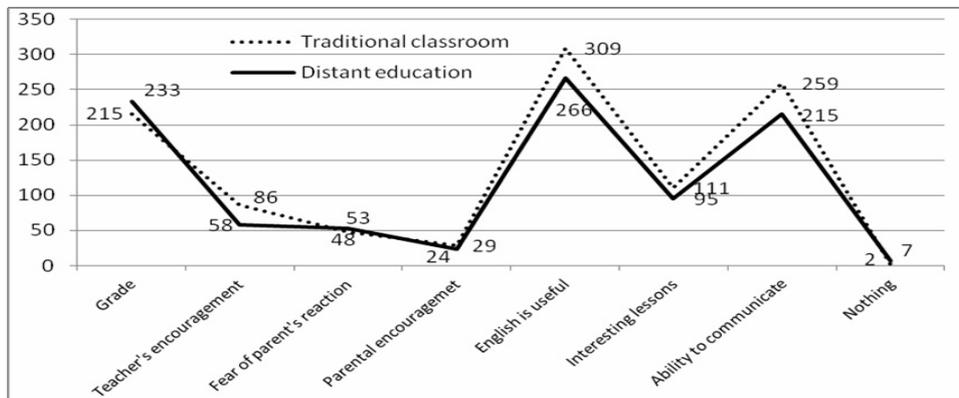


Figure 12. Factors motivating students to learn the language in distant education and in traditional classroom.

In questions 15-20 students indicated whether working in particular language skills is easier for them in distant education comparing to the traditional classroom: question 15 – learning grammar, 16 – learning vocabulary, 17 – developing speaking skills, 18 – listening, 19 – reading and 20 – writing.

In students' opinion, learning grammar seems to be more complicated in distant education than in the traditional classroom – 62.9% chose options 1-2-3 (Figure 13). Also, the extreme negative answer maintains 10.2% of the students, and the extreme positive one only 3.5%. Options 1-2 were chosen by 29.6% of the participants, while the sum of options 5-6 gives only 13.2%. Learning vocabulary, on the other hand, seemed a bit easier in online classes – less than half of the participants (47.1%) chose options 1-2-3 (Figure 13). Also, the extreme negative answer maintains only 5.9% of the students, and the extreme positive rises to 7.8%. Options 1-2 were chosen by 15.3% of the participants, while the sum of options 5-6 gives almost a quarter of participants – 24.4%.

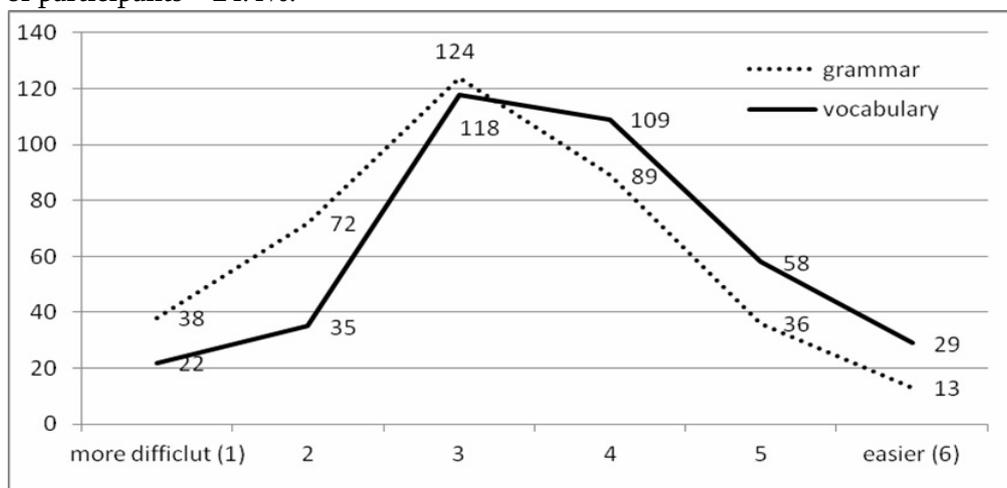


Figure 13. Learning grammar and vocabulary in distant education and in traditional classroom.

Developing language skills varies mainly depending on the channel of communication – the skills connected with the written word (reading and writing) seem to be developed easier in online teaching, while the ones connected with the spoken one (listening and speaking) benefit from traditional model of education (Figure 14).

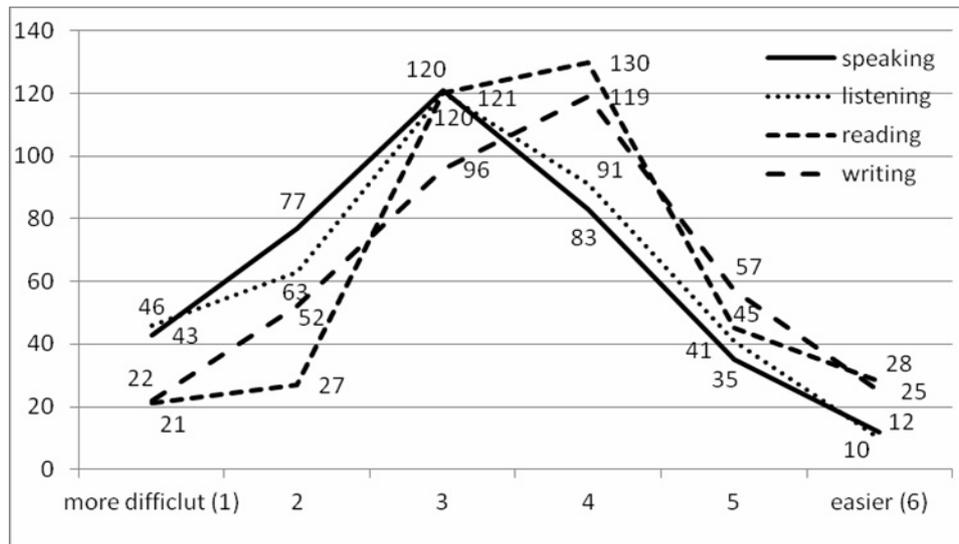


Figure 14. Developing language skills in distant education and in traditional classroom

In students' perception, developing the speaking skill in distant education is more difficult than in the traditional classroom – 64.4% of the participants chose options 1-2-3 (Figure 14). The extreme negative answer is 11%, exceeded only by the difficulty with listening comprehension, and the extreme positive is at the lowest level, with only 3.2% of the students. Options 1-2 were chosen by almost one third of the participants (31.8%), while the sum of options 5-6 gives only 12.6% of participants. The curve for the listening skill looks similar, with 61.7% of the participants choosing options 1-2-3, with 12.4% of the students for the extreme negative, and only 2.7% for the extreme positive.

Developing the skills connected with the written word indicates an opposite tendency – only 45.3% of the participants chose options 1-2-3 (Figure 14). Also, the extreme negative answer maintains only 5.7% of the students, and the extreme positive rises to 7.5%. Options 1-2 were chosen by only 13% of the participants, while the sum of options 5-6 rises to almost one fifth of the students (19.6%). The curve for writing follows the same direction – 45.5% of the participants chose options 1-2-3, with 5.9% of the students for the extreme negative, and 6.7% for the extreme positive.

Questions 21, 22 and 23 asked about the frequency of online lessons (Figure 15), task assignment (Figure 16) and the amount of time students needed to complete the tasks (Figure 17).

As figure 15 shows, as many as 82.1% of students had online lessons with their teachers at least once week, with half of the students meeting their teachers online two or three times a week, and 13.6% of survey participant taking part in online lessons at least four times a week, which means almost every week day. The dark side of the situation is that as many as 14.7% of the students did not have any online lessons, which means they were left with all the language work on their own.

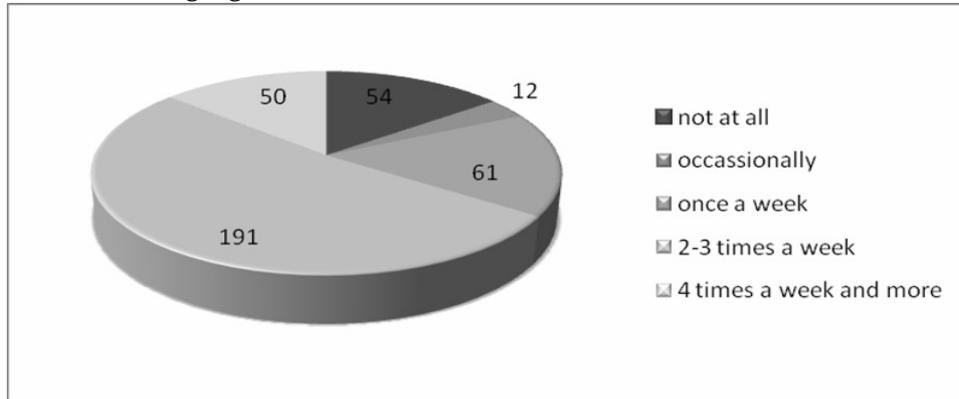


Figure 15. Frequency of online lessons in distant education

The situation looks more optimistic when task assignment is considered (Figure 16) – 99.5% of the students were given tasks to complete by their teachers, and 86.5% were supposed to work on developing their language skills at least once a week, with 69.1% of students having tasks assigned twice a week and more often. Only 13.5 students were not supposed to do regular work.

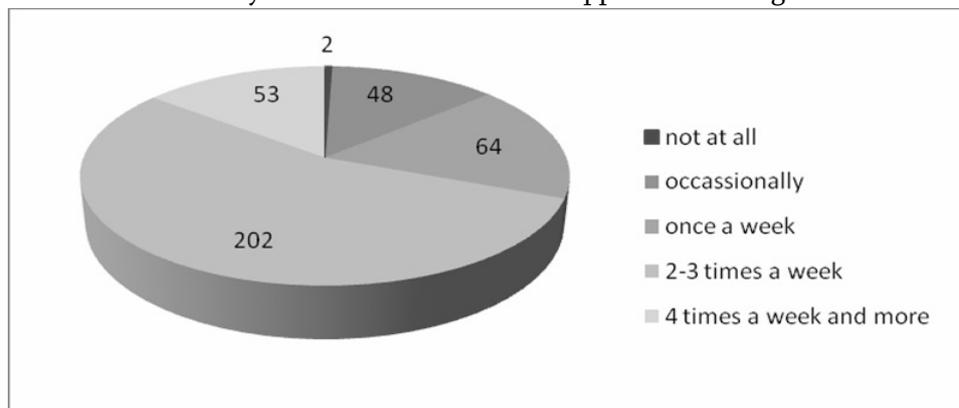


Figure 16. Frequency of giving assignment in distant education

Most students do not express complaints about the time they were supposed to spend on completing the tasks assigned by their English teachers (Figure 17).

34.2% of the participants marked the task completion took them a lot of time, however they did not go for the 'too much' option, taken only by 12.3% of the students in the survey. Half of the participants (49.3%) noted that the work did not take them too much time. As far as the responses provided by students themselves, they expressed opinions that the amount of work was similar to regular schoolwork, and sometimes required more or less effort.

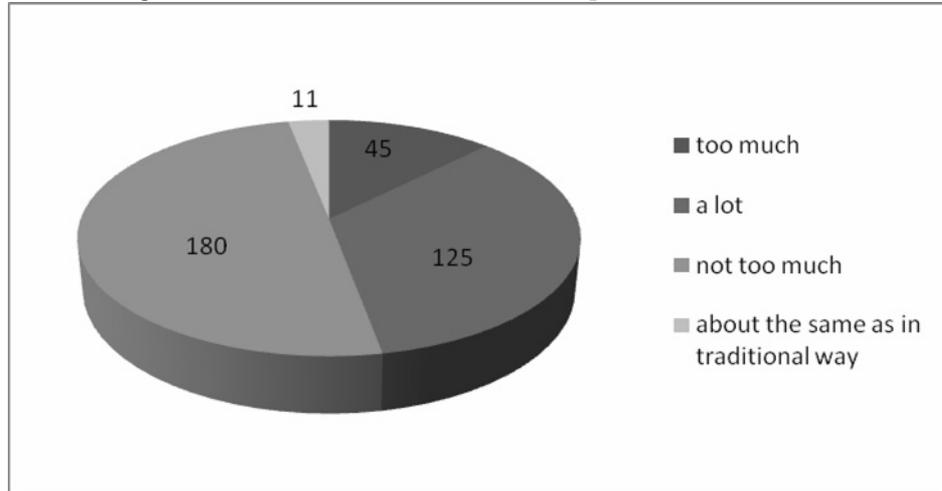


Figure 17. Amount of time students spent on task completion in distant education

### 2.5. Research limitations

Although the survey covered a relatively numerous group of students, it has to be noticed that there may be groups of learners whose opinions were not expressed. As it has already been mentioned, there were students excluded from distant education, and the responses from those left out of the system of education could be more negative, changing the general results of the study. The general intrinsic motivation of these learners tends to be at a lower level comparing to students taking part in the survey, and the distant education and no extrinsic motivation definitely did not change the situation for better.

Also, it is necessary to realise that some teachers were not too involved in conducting online classes. These teachers were not able to share the link to the survey with their students, or might have been reluctant to ask their students express opinions on distant education, for fear these opinions could put them as teachers in the negative light.

### 3. Conclusions

The survey shows that in most cases distant language education in Polish schools was successful. Most students took part in online lessons of English and in a variety of online activities on regular basis, with the support of their language teachers. Majority of students express positive opinions on the steps taken by their English teachers.

We should definitely take advantage of the fact that students tend to work on their language skills with more consistency. This means, that perhaps it would be a good idea to include certain elements present in distant education also in the traditional classroom. Students notice that they develop their reading and writing skills more effectively through distance education, and a part of this work could be shifted to online activities also in the traditional model. On the other hand, the spoken channel requires more attention from the teachers.

The results of the survey indicate some areas for improvement. First of all, the answers given by the students show a certain decrease in their intrinsic motivation. Both aspects of intrinsic motivation that the survey addresses drop by around 12% (from 84 to 72.1% and from 70.4 to 58.3%). This decrease is followed by diminished influence of external motivators: the encouragement from the teacher drops by as much as 28% (from 86 to 58%), interest in the lessons goes down by 4.5% (from 30.2 to 25.7%). The only significant increase in the extrinsic motivation can be observed in the role of grades, the role of which goes up by almost 5% (from 58.4 to 63.1%). However, the general decrease in motivation has to be noticed. Whereas teachers can't directly influence students' intrinsic motivation, actions can be taken to maintain the level of the encouragement from the educators at least at the level from traditional education, and to keep students' interest in the online lessons. This could easily be achieved with the multitude of resources, quality educational materials and a variety of techniques, activities and tasks that can be used when working online. Following Deci and Ryan's (2000) recommendation, it is necessary to make students energized and activated toward a goal they are to achieve.

It is also crucial to mention involving learners emotionally in the learning process. The tasks which allow them to express their own views, share their experience and make up for the situation of isolation and social distancing should definitely result in keeping the level of motivation at the satisfactory level.

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