

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR ACQUISITION BY DISTANCE AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract. Distance learning introduced in almost all educational establishments in spring 2020 has raised interest among researchers how to deal with it in a more productive way. Thus, the goal of the research was to find out undergraduates' views on distance learning of English grammar and the use of online revision materials in developing students' independent study skills at a tertiary institution in Latvia. The research tool was a questionnaire consisting of open-ended and closed questions. Twenty-three students answered the survey questions. The research results indicate that studying by distance is preferred because it allows the students to choose the study time and place, to develop their time-management, independent study skills, as well as improve their motivation. The main drawbacks of studying by distance, according to the students, are insufficient feedback, inability to ask questions directly and receive immediate answers and problems with their own time management and independent study skills.

Key words: English grammar acquisition, distance learning, independent study skills, tertiary level students

INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, all students and teachers had to get used to distance studies, which was the only mode offered instead of in-class activities. Moore, Dickson-Dean and Galyen's (2011) research revealed that there is no unanimous perception how to view distance learning because of its different learning environments. One of the learning environments used during the pandemic was online, which includes both real-time online classes and/or only the use of various platforms for independent studies. Online learning is viewed as an updated form of distance learning (e.g. Benson, 2002), mainly employing communication technologies (Lowenthal, Wilson and Parrish, 2009). Also, irrespective of the pandemic, mobile learning (Bernacki et al., 2020) and, especially Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) have recently gained

popularity in language classrooms, and practitioners are seeking how to use computers in their classrooms more successfully (Chambers and Bax, 2006; see a more detailed analysis of research trends in Stickler and Shi, 2016; also Seaman et al.'s study, 2018). E-Learning (i.e. learning delivered to an electronic device, e.g. a computer, via an Internet channel) or M-Learning (i.e. learning delivered via a portable device, e.g. a tablet) 'supports both autonomous and collaborative learning', students can work at their own speed and have a larger role in their study process, and all that depends on teacher's skills of applying ICT (i.e. Information and Communication Technologies) resources and organizing their classes (Granić et al., 2009). Chambers and Bax (2006: 477) emphasize that teachers should receive 'sympathetic support, both technical and pedagogical' to help them integrate 'computer activities with non-computer activities' as well as being able to 'fit the software to their students' particular needs'. the goal of integration of ICT in educational institutions is to provide a more flexible learning mode and to meet diverse student needs (Arrosagaray et al., 2019: 32).

Prior studies on student satisfaction about online English courses revealed that students had a positive attitude towards it (Ekmekeçi, 2015). Ekmekeçi's research demonstrates that students might have a negative attitude towards distance education when it concerns language learning, which includes four language skill development. the students wanted more listening, speaking and writing in their courses, while reading and grammar seemed to be sufficient in proportion. They considered that they did not get enough feedback from their teachers, they did not like the assignments and examinations, while they liked that they could study when and where they wished. Ekmekeçi considers that there is little research on language student views about distance learning.

As in spring 2020 due to the pandemic many universities and schools were forced to move to teaching by distance, the goal of the present study was to find out undergraduates' views on distance learning of English grammar and the use of online revision materials in developing students' independent study skills at a tertiary institution in Latvia.

The research questions were:

- 1) What are the benefits and drawbacks of acquiring English grammar by distance at a tertiary level?
- 2) In students' opinion, how does the availability of online study materials and materials for revision enhance the development of students' independent study skills?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1 DISTANCE LEARNING

The latest research demonstrates that distance learning gains more and more popularity in the world where thousands of distance courses are offered to

students at different levels and in different study programmes, which results in large dropout rates and, consequently, interest in how to solve this problem (see e.g. Gregori et al., 2018). Gregori et al.'s (2018: 49) research demonstrates that among the problems of distance learning is (1) a lower level of maturity of undergraduates than master level learners, (2) the duration of courses, (3) the need to study online instead of on-campus, (4) the need for 'more specific learning material or a suitable Internet connection [...]', (5) 'the difficulty of distance learning'. They suggest several solutions how to help students get used to distance learning. The first is the initial contact. They also suggest organizing the first class in person or at least 'virtual joint session' where students learn about the content of the course and how to communicate with the teacher. For those students who cannot be present during the first session, Gregori et al. (ibid.) propose to video-record it or try to negotiate the date and time with all learners. The second is the tutoring. They consider that students should be guided by using 'news, announcements, recommended study materials', in addition, the teachers need to organize both 'virtual and face-to-face' tutorials so that students can study regularly. The communication could be done by email or videoconferences (ibid.). The third suggestion is continuous assessment when learners can perform written examinations, oral presentations, written essays and exercises or problem-solving tasks (ibid.: 50). They also emphasize that teachers should not overload learners so that they can manage all subjects. The fourth aspect is final assessment, which should reflect the result during the term and the final examination (ibid.). The examination requirements must be set clearly, as well its grading (ibid.). The final aspect is the way how to identify or verify the test takers' identity. A solution for that could be a videoconference or even a face-to-face examination (ibid.: 51). The linguists emphasize that the basic principle for successful distance learning is regular communication with students, for example, by using emails for reminders and the use of the Virtual Classroom to help students to manage some delayed tasks or solve their problems (ibid.).

Arrosagaray et al. (2019) assert that more research on adult student (aged 25-64) attitudes to ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) is needed. Their study on heterogeneous adult students dealt with such modes as face-to-face, blended and distance language learning to find out student 'confidence in digital competence, the ICT impact on their learning and their reception of the learning potential of ICT' (ibid.: 31). They noticed 'a reduction in communication, interaction or social exchange' when courses were offered in the distance mode (ibid.: 37). They also concluded that there was not real difference in learners' motivation when distance learning was offered even if it ensured more benefits to students (ibid.); moreover, the respondents claimed that ICT had a good impact on their learning results as they 'feel more independent', and 'they understand more easily what they are learning', a computer offers more 'fun' in their learning process (ibid.: 37). However, male students were more confident than female when working with computers, the same referred to younger learners if compared with older or retired people (ibid.). It was interesting

that the students from the distance learning groups felt more self-confident if compared with the students from the other learning mode such as classroom or face-to-face and blended learning (ibid.). Another study demonstrated that both modes, face-to-face and online learning, can be effective (see Driscoll et al., 2012: 323). Driscoll et al. (2012: 323) also emphasize that students who are prone to collaboration with peers and instructors are more satisfied with both types of courses. However, their population in both the modes differed. Online courses were taken by older students with lower level of knowledge but more experience with online studies, where fewer hours were offered per week, while the face-to-face students had better performance and more classes (ibid.: 325). Despite the differences, it is important the courses are well-structured and ‘with simple and effective instructions’, as well as that lower level students, who are not so independent in their studies, receive more interaction with the instructor (ibid.). Driscoll et al. (ibid.: 326) believe that the online learning ‘if designed properly’ can be as successful as face-to-face learning.

Prior research asserts the importance of learners’ motivation in their studies (Trowler, V. and Trowler, P. 2010), especially in the use of new technologies in language learning (Chang, C., Chang, C.-K. and Shi, 2016). V. Trowler and P. Trowler’s (2010: 13) research demonstrates that engagement in the study process is essential to ‘least prepared’ learners for university education. Such types of students may be found among international students, students with disabilities, part-time, returning and many other types. They may perceive insufficient engagement negatively because they may feel isolated or even foreign at university. Some researchers (e.g. Cheng, P. and Ding, 2021) have concluded that students from other cultures such as China may have a lower performance and engagement in Western Higher Educational Institutions than local students. P. Cheng and Ding’s study (2021) emphasises the importance of revision in language learning as after the completion of online review exercises, student performance increased. the importance of assessment in promoting student motivation is also emphasized by P. Cheng and Ding (2021). High-quality online learning can be achieved if learners are interested in their studies (Ramsden, 2003) and have Internet self-efficacy, which must be promoted (Liang and Tsai, 2008). Low level English proficiency students and students who are used to a teacher-centred learning usually do not exhibit the ability of high-quality learning (Cheng, P. and Ding, 2021). Another factor influencing the learning process negatively is ‘an excessive amount of material [low level students] cannot cope with’ (ibid).

Hu et al.’s study (2018) across 44 countries revealed unexpected conclusions concerning correlation between ICT availability, use and attitudes to it, on the one hand, and student performance in mathematics, reading and science at school, on the other hand. If students had ICT at home, it did not give a positive influence on their performance, and the researchers concluded that the reason for that could be its bad quality or addiction to other activities which were not linked with studies (ibid.: 9). They also found that if ICT was used at school, even

with high frequency, it may not provide a positive effect on students' learning, but 'may even be detrimental' to it. As regards ICT use at school, the findings were mixed as the results might depend on a subject (ibid.: 9-10). Hu et al. (ibid.) found a positive correlation between learner academic performance and their interest, competence and autonomy in using ICT. Also, other researchers emphasize that learners need to be motivated to use online learning, be flexible, ready to do self-evaluation, have access to the needed mobile device or computer, have Internet access, have computer literacy, be able to manage their time and actively participate in the study process (Frith, 2013).

Lee, Choi and Cho (2019) who researched adult learners' experiences in a distance programme, namely, how they became self-regulated learners, concluded that adult learners had different experiences, and also different needs and interests. It turned out that such type of learners preferred if they were provided with detailed instructions, namely, 'what to do and how to perform' the task and that had already been done at the beginning of their studies. They also concluded that 'adult students' distance learning experiences can be developmental and transformative (rather than being pre-determined or instrumental) (ibid.: 32-33).

Griffiths (2016: 160) distinguishes several distance or online learning types: (1) in-person; (2) web-enhanced with part of the course content and assignments are available online; (3) partially online, where 20 per cent of classes are online; (4) hybrid or blended learning, where 33-80 per cent classes are online; (5) online, where 80 to almost 100 per cent of classes are online and (6) fully online. a large number of research papers on distance learning can be found in 2020 when the whole world was forced to do remote teaching because of pandemic restrictions. Al Lily et al. (2020) discuss its influence on Arab culture when conventional distance learning was forced without any preparation, when involved instructors felt incompetent, which in its turn might 'compromise education'. Another stressor was the need to do distance learning or teaching from home. They named it Crisis distance education (CDE), which in contrast to before-existing distance education, was organized during the pandemic as an additional variable added in the situation when nothing could be done face-to-face (ibid.: 1-2). In 2020 spring term, students could not choose another option for their studies; they were forced to do distance learning at home even if they did not have appropriate equipment (e.g. a computer, a good Internet connection) or place where to do that as several family members had turned their home into either school or workplace.

Several studies (Dendir and Maxwell, 2020; Golden and Kohlbeck, 2020) have discussed student academic dishonesty when taking online tests and examinations, which was the only option offered during pandemic isolation. Dendir and Maxwell's (2020) research provides evidence that students showed lower performance in online courses when a webcam recording software was used at the examinations. If testing is done online, students can access to different instructional materials, including homework assignments and even test banks (Savage and Simkin, 2010; Cheng, C. and Crumbley, 2018). If test takers use test banks, they can paraphrase the questions, so that the students do not

easily get access to the answers (Golden and Kohlbeck, 2020). If live proctoring is chosen to avoid cheating, it can, in its turn, decrease student numbers in online courses (Dendir and Maxwell, 2020: 9). Another solution offered is to introduce sanctions if a student is caught using restricted materials and require other students to report about cheating (Savage and Simkin, 2010); however, then there should be a more reliable way how to prove that and not always other students will be interested in reporting about their friends. It is also suggested that instructors use more in-depth means of checking learners' knowledge (ibid.)

2 GRAMMAR ACQUISITION AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

As stated by Larsen-Freeman (2015: 263-264), despite researchers' suggestions to move from the traditional approach to grammar acquisition, practitioners still focus on accuracy in their classes, and students also value that approach as useful. She also admits that not all rules can be deduced from context and that students prefer the deductive approach (ibid.: 268). Nassaji (2017: 205) views grammar as acquisition of 'rules and structures and the ability to use them in a communicative context'. There is a debate whether grammar is consciously learnt from rules or 'acquired in the context of meaningful language use' (ibid.: 205). There are two types of learning, i.e. explicit and implicit. As the advocates of the Noticing Hypothesis in Second Language Acquisition (e.g. Schmidt, 2001) claim, explicit knowledge helps learners to notice certain linguistic forms subconsciously and incorporate them later into communication if students are developmentally ready for that. Therefore, it is suggested that learners should be exposed to different communicative tasks where forms are used in different contexts (Ellis, 1993; Ellis, 2005; Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2013; Ellis, 2015).

Long (1991: 45-46) distinguishes between 'focus on forms' when language is studied in separate sentences and 'focus on form' when learners view language as a means of communication. If L2 (second language) learners focus only on communication or meaning, they will not manage to master the target language 'to achieve full native-like competence' (Long, 1998: 35). Instead, he proposes that the focus on linguistics features is also needed when completing communicative tasks (ibid.). However, Ellis (2016) considers that *focus on form* may refer not only to grammatical form, but also lexical, as well as pragma-linguistic aspects. Also, other scholars hold the same view that it is not sufficient to focus on discrete-point grammar learning (Ellis, 2006; Nassaji and Fotos, 2010). Ellis (2006) considers that both approaches are effective if combined; namely, the target forms are used for communication when performing different tasks. When studying tenses, it is also essential to deal with their indicators or linguistic signals in a text, such as time adverbs.

Larsen-Freeman points out that there is no unanimous view among researchers how much to centre on form in the classes of grammar; moreover, it depends on student needs (Larsen-Freeman, 2015: 271). For example, students

majoring in linguistics need to focus both on accuracy and fluency in their studies. the deductive approach could also be more time consuming and, thus, less productive if employed in a limited number of grammar classes at the tertiary level. Moreover, there are many other courses in the target language where students can practice grammar use in different contexts, which helps to balance the various needs of future specialists.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The present study considers the undergraduate students' opinion about acquiring English grammar by distance. As distance learning was a mode imposed by external circumstances, namely 2020 pandemic restrictions, this can be more considered an introductory study on the above topic because only fifty full-time students taking an English grammar course at a university in Latvia in the respective study semester were involved; thus, the sample size is rather small to generalise, but it can provide material for future research. the students were majoring in English philology or language and business studies.

Out of total 16 weeks of studies, the students studied face-to-face for six weeks, and the rest of the course was held by distance, so it can be stated that the initial contact in person was ensured, and the overall acquisition process of English grammar can be referred to as blended learning, although only the second part of the studies was conducted by distance. All the course materials and assignments were available online, on the Moodle platform. the students were provided with answer keys for all the assignments meant for independent studies. No anxiety was expected to be triggered regarding the use of the materials and the Moodle platform as it has been used at the university for many years, and the students were familiar with it because this was already their second or fourth semester at university. However, the tests and the examination that were either held online on the same platform or distributed electronically via emails and timed in both cases were a new experience to the students.

During these ten weeks of learning by distance, the students were supposed to study on their own, but tutorials were available via email correspondence and to language and business students also online, at MS Teams meetings. Some of the revision classes for the language and business students' group were also held in an online mode, using MS Teams. During the tests and the examination, it was possible to contact the teaching staff in case there were any technical problems that would hamper the student submit the test or the examination tasks within the allocated time limit. In other words, it can be stated that the authors of the paper implemented the suggestions by Gregori et al. (2018) who concluded that the initial contact and the tutorials via emails and videoconferences as well as the availability of recommendations, guidelines, assignments and theoretical material, are very important for a successful result when acquiring a language by distance. Continuous assessment and the final assessment were also ensured as all

students had to take one online test and an online examination as well as submit some written assignments to the teaching staff to be checked and evaluated. Most of the training tasks, however, had to be checked by the students as they were provided with the answer keys to the assignments. Regarding the potential problem with identifying or verifying the test takers' identity mentioned in previous research, as well as the student academic dishonesty, it has to be admitted that the issue was only partly addressed. The students, whose test and examination were held on the Moodle platform, had to authorize to get access to the test, but there is no guarantee that they did not check some sources or asked for somebody's help while taking the online tests. However, each assignment was timed and that allows the authors consider that even if there were some cases of academic dishonesty, their impact on the overall students' test results was insignificant.

At the end of the course, the students were asked to participate in a survey (see Appendix 1 for the questionnaire) in order to find out their opinion about studying by distance and the usefulness of various study materials and assignments. The questionnaire was created by the authors of this paper, using Google forms, and was anonymous. The answer choices included all the possible ways of studying offered to the students during this distance learning period, thus also enabling the authors to conclude about the students' independent study skills. As the authors of this research were interested in the students' opinion on the benefits and drawbacks of studying by distance, half of the questions (4, 5, 6, 7, 13) were open-ended questions and the other half closed (8, 9, 10, 11, 12), with the first three being demographic questions. Questions 4 and 5 inquired about the students' overall attitude to studying by distance while questions 6, 9 and 10 were aimed at researching the students' approach to acquiring English grammar. Questions 7 and 8 were included to provide the possibility of comparing the students' opinion about their skills and approaches to studying.

Unfortunately, out of the fifty active students, at the end of the semester only 23 submitted their answers, i.e. 46 percent response rate. However, providing comments to the answers at such a rate was unusual in the authors' experience as all 23 respondents provided comments on why they had listed the particular benefits of distance learning, and 21 respondents did the same regarding the comments on the drawbacks of studying by distance, which allows the authors of the paper to consider this information valuable for further research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students majoring in English philology comprised 57 per cent of the respondents, the other 43 per cent being those of language and business students, but, as the answers do not demonstrate any significant statistical differences, they will be analysed together. Among the respondents, 61 per cent were the first-year students, thus taking their second semester at university, 35 per cent

of the respondents were in their fourth semester, with the remaining 4 per cent representing students of the sixth semester, thus making it possible for the authors to conclude that they are experienced or somewhat experienced tertiary level students acquainted with the main ways and principles of university requirements and approaches to studies, including independent studies.

The students were asked to name at least three benefits and the main drawbacks of distance learning that could help to develop or prevent from developing the students' independent learning skills. The majority of them (17) mentioned the opportunity to plan their own time, thus manage to do both study and work or 'other daily activities', implementing the overall time management and prioritizing skills were named among the main benefits of this time as well. In fact, regarding the first reason, three students mentioned that it was easier to balance their studies with their other life activities during the studies by distance, partly also due to the fact that they did not have to travel to the University and, thus, time was freed for studies and activities not related to studies. As other benefits were also mentioned: (1) the possibility to study each topic at their own pace, not depending on what other students need or might consider the right pace; (2) the possibility to revise (or not to revise) some topic if and when needed; (3) the opportunity to receive a more detailed and individual feedback from the professor, 'which enables students to improve their written work'; (4) the opportunity to use MS Teams chat 'to consult my peers without disturbing the rest of the group during lectures'; (5) the possibility to apply their own study methods and choose the learning environment, (6) the opportunity to 'access information all day long'; (7) the 'unlimited access to online libraries, video materials, and encyclopedias that cannot be provided in class when studying'. According to the authors of the present paper, the latter comment rather indicates the insufficient use of digital resources and tools in face-to-face classrooms and homework assignments than to an advantage of studying by distance. At least it should not be the case.

Two students also mentioned that studying by distance, from home, is less stressful. One student indicated that this mode of studying allowed for broader networking possibilities while another student emphasized the lack of group work as a benefit. This leads to a conclusion that studying by distance and at an individual pace satisfy student needs better. Overall, the students stated that they felt they had improved their digital skills, including digital information management skills ('distance learning gives an opportunity to explore and master all types of digital tools, such as thesauri, mind mapping software and collocational dictionaries'), independent study skills, concentration skills (as there are many distractors at home), sense of responsibility, self-motivation and self-discipline. As it has been stated by several researchers (Trowler, V. and Trowler, P, 2010; Chang, C., Chang, C.-K. and Shi, 2016), learner motivation is very important, and the respondents admitted that studying English grammar by distance even allowed them to become more motivated. Unfortunately, as the survey was anonymous, it was not possible to analyze how the students'

level of English might have affected their choices as previous research also indicated that students with lower level of knowledge favour independent studies less.

In addition to acquiring English grammar, one student also mentioned that independent studying had taught ‘a lot about myself’ and ‘this newly gained knowledge has been useful in many areas of my life’. Another student wrote that ‘The lack of in-person communication might help to develop the ability to better express one’s opinion verbally (as there are no gestures, facial expressions, etc. to “guide” the conversation)’. This seems to be a completely different view at learning by distance as usually it is considered that communication skills, which require proper use of grammar, are better acquired in real face-to-face communication.

However, studying by distance also poses certain problems. They may be grouped as the ones referring to the acquisition process and were mentioned by at least 3 respondents, for example: (1) a small number of lectures online; (2) difficulty to understand the new material independently; (3) inability to ask questions directly when something is not clear; (4) limited access to the teaching staff; (5) insufficient feedback; (6) delayed feedback; (7) lack of materials; (8) technical problems (the Internet connection, problems with computers and/or other digital tools); (9) the digital skills of the teaching staff; and the ones related to the overall students’ study skills and competence such as (1) time management skills, which are an even more serious problem if the student is not particularly good at them, (2) inability to study on one’s own without any external assistance by the teaching staff.

The above is similar to the findings of Ekmekçi’s (2015) research that revealed that the students considered that they did not get enough feedback from their teachers, but they liked that they could choose the study time and place. The fact that some students mentioned lack of materials as a drawback while the availability of digital materials at any time and in many sources was mentioned as a benefit by other students makes the authors assume that students might lack the skill to search independently for additional materials.

Another drawback of distance learning that should not be left without attention is the mention of feeling lonely, which may affect the motivation to study. It is a psychological factor that needs to be addressed. It is the reason why pure distance learning, without live online classes (not just recorded video presentations) might not need to be practiced.

In order to find out whether the students find revision of the theoretical material and assignments appropriate to prepare for the grammar tests and examination when studying by distance, questions 6, 8, 9, 10 were asked, putting emphasis on how students prepared for the online test and examination. The results indicate that most of the students do practice tasks and check with the keys and the rules before tests (thirteen respondents selected this answer choice), and six students also read theoretical material, several times,

if needed, before the tests, which is an implementation of the recommendation in P. Cheng and Ding's study (2021) that emphasised the importance of revision in language acquisition. However, only 2 students searched for and used additional theoretical materials for self-study before tests. This leads to a conclusion that, although many students indicated that they had developed their independent study skills and they could use the benefit of distance learning that the study materials and additional materials are available on the internet, in fact, very few used this opportunity. The reasons might be observed in two comments provided by the students on the drawbacks of distance learning. The first one is: 'sometimes it's hard and time consuming to find the right materials for in-depth understanding of topics'. The second states: 'Freedom that distance learning provides hinders those who need external structure to be able to persevere and be productive. People often need a certain "box" to be able to break out of it and be creative'. Both comments are, in fact, related – students need structures, frameworks, provided materials even for additional studies, in other words, everything supplied for use and then they feel more comfortable and can study independently, which corresponds to Gregori et al.'s (2018) findings and approves that the authors' approach to providing as much material as possible in the e-studies platform Moodle was appropriate, however, not sufficient for some of the students. The analysis of all the answers provided by each respondent indicated that the students who stated that they needed more feedback and more guidance were also the ones who mentioned that they lacked face-to-face contact or at least online classes in which they could clarify the unclear issues and ask questions and get response immediately when the problem with understanding the material or the assignment occurred. However, a question arises whether very close guidance always allows students to prepare for their future careers in an agile environment, which has been governing our lives and studies for the last year, and flexibly adjust to it.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings approved those of previous research that, when acquiring language by distance, students appreciate the opportunity to study when and where they can because it allows them to combine their studies with work or, as they indicated themselves, with their other daily activities, thus allowing to balance their studies, work and life better, which is important for an overall mental health and prevents from dropping out of the course or the entire study programme. Therefore, this finding is important also for university administrators because high drop-out rates seem to be a problem in many tertiary institutions nowadays, especially during the corona virus pandemic.

The possibility to choose the study time and place may also increase the learners' motivation to do the assignments and study as they feel control over their time.

The students' opinion that they lacked professors' feedback, or it was insufficient, and that the teaching staff were not available when needed leads to a conclusion that there need to be ways how to provide more detailed feedback and possible answers to 'frequently asked questions' designed in the courses that are delivered by distance.

The opportunity to study by distance increases the students' motivation to learn, develops their independent study skills, as well as their digital competence. At the same time, the students' language level and their previous digital skills, including the digital information management skills, may impact not only their success with independent studies as such and in tests, but also on their motivation and willingness to study on their own.

The students' answers also indicated that when preparing for the test and the examination, they used the opportunity to revise the material by looking through the theoretical materials and redoing the assignments that had already been done once. It makes the authors conclude that such an opportunity needs to be actively communicated and reminded to the students.

The ability to practise and improve the students' time management and priority setting skills is an advantage of acquiring English grammar by distance, but at the same time the lack of these skills is also a factor that makes students look at studying by distance as a not preferred study mode.

Despite the small number of the survey respondents, it can be concluded that the research questions were answered and the results, although they cannot be generalised, indicate to tendencies in the students' opinion about the advantages and disadvantages of acquiring English grammar by distance and the usefulness of revision in order to prepare for online tests and examinations when studying by distance.

Therefore, to make the distance learning experience more appealing to students and more effective for language acquisition, the authors of the paper have arrived at the following recommendations:

1. If the entire study course is planned to be delivered by distance, the first class needs to be held online in order to ensure the initial contact. It is also advisable to record the first class and make it available to the students so that they can revisit it whenever needed.
2. Online classes need to be held also during the distance learning course, their number depending on the needs of the respective student group.
3. Student emails need to be checked and responded more frequently than just once in 24 hours.
4. It might be useful to consider recording answers to the most frequently asked questions about the course materials, so that students have the opportunity to check the answers as frequently as they wish and need.
5. Students should be offered individual and/or group online tutorials once a week in order to reduce anxiety of studying by distance.

However, to make more generalizable conclusions, the research needs to be continued to observe whether the same conclusions can be made with a larger number of students as well.

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APPENDIX 1 QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Students

We are doing research on the ways of developing student independent learning skills.

Could you, please, fill in the questionnaire and provide comments where requested? the survey is anonymous, and the results will be considered only in a summarized form. Answering will not require you more than 5-8 minutes.

1. I am a student from
 - part time
 - full time
2. My study programme is
 - MLBS
 - English Philology
 - other
3. I study in
 - year 1
 - year 2
 - year 3
 - year 4

4. Name 3 main benefits of distance learning which could help to develop your independent learning skills

1...

2...

3...

Please comment your choice: _____

5. Name the main drawbacks of distance learning (if any) which could prevent developing your independent learning skills

_____ Please comment your choice: _____

6. My grammar test results are better if I (choose the most appropriate option(s) for you):

read theories a couple of times before tests

learn theories by heart before tests

do not read theories before tests

do only practice tasks before tests

do practice tasks and check with the keys before tests

do practice tasks and check with keys and the rules before tests

do not do practice tasks, but do tests, correct mistakes and then retake tests

do not do practice tasks, but do tests several times

find and use additional theoretical materials for self-study before tests

find and do additional tasks before tests

find and do additional self-tests before tests

7. My average mark in English grammar is

8-10

6-7

4-5

3 and less

8. Choose the best answer for the following statements

	fully agree	more agree than disagree	more disagree than agree	fully disagree
I am good at time managing				
I read and follow all teacher's messages sent to me and/or my group				
I read all handouts for each grammar class				

9. The tasks which I redo before the grammar test are
the easiest ones
all
the most difficult ones
none
10. I do the same tasks before the test
once
twice
more than once
11. Please, provide any other comments on your independent learning:

Thank you!

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