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QUARANTEACHING AT A TRANSCARPATHIAN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT: STUDENT VIEWS

Ilona Huszti, Ph.D. in Language Pedagogy, Associate Professor at the Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education.

ORCID: 0000-0002-1900-8112

E-mail: huszti.ilona@kmf.org.ua

Ilona Lechner, Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education.

ORCID: 0000-0001-7235-6506

E-mail: lechner.ilona@kmf.org.ua

Erzsébet Bárány, Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education.

ORCID: 0000-0001-8395-5475

E-mail: barany.erszebet@kmf.org.ua

Márta Fábián, Senior Teacher at the Department of Philology, Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education.

ORCID: 0000-0002-5549-1156

E-mail: fabian.marta@kmf.org.ua

Distance learning (DL) has not been a common practice in Ukraine before the COVID-19 lockdown in March, 2020, so it meant real challenges for participants of education. This new reality triggered us to get insights into our students' attitudes to DL. An online questionnaire was designed that was completed by 95 English, Hungarian and Ukrainian major BA and MA college students concerning the issue of DL. Results seem to prove that it has both positive and negative effects. From the empirical evidence it derives that introverted students can be winners of online education and they can continue their education in digital mode in the future with ease.

Keywords: COVID-19; quarantine periods; quaranteaching; distance learning (DL); emergency remote teaching (ERT); higher education; student perspectives on DL; student attitudes to DL; Transcarpathia.

НАВЧАННЯ ПІД ЧАС КАРАНТИНУ В ОДНОМУ ІЗ ЗАКАРПАТСЬКИХ ЗАКЛАДІВ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ: ПОГЛЯДИ СТУДЕНТІВ

Ілона Густі, доктор філософії, доцент кафедри філології, Закарпатський угорський інститут ім. Ференца Ракоці II.

ORCID: 0000-0002-1900-8112

E-mail: huszti.ilona@kmf.org.ua

Ілона Лехнер, доктор філософії, доцент кафедри філології, Закарпатський угорський інститут ім. Ференца Ракоці II.

ORCID: 0000-0001-7235-6506

E-mail: lechner.ilona@kmf.org.ua

Єлизавета Барань, доктор філософії, доцент кафедри філології Закарпатський угорський інститут ім. Ференца Ракоці II.

ORCID: 0000-0001-8395-5475

E-mail: barany.erszebet@kmf.org.ua

Марта Фабіян, старший викладач кафедри філології, Закарпатський угорський інститут ім. Ференца Ракоці II.

ORCID: 0000-0002-5549-1156

E-mail: fabian.marta@kmf.org.ua

Минуло більше двох років, як COVID кардинально змінив наше життя. У зв'язку з цією ситуацією освітянам в усьому світі довелося зіткнутися з труднощами. Виникла потреба в ознайомленні з новими поняттями та засвоєнням методів і форм роботи в умовах дистанційного навчання, а потім – в умовах гібридного навчання. Наголошено на тому, що освітяни швидко розвивали свої цифрові навички, довелося з рекордною швидкістю навчитися користуватися різноманітними програмами. Терміни Google Classroom, Meet, Zoom, Messenger тощо стали частиною нашого повсякденного мововживання.

Подано визначення понять, пов'язаних із дистанційною освітою, наголошено на перевагах і недоліках онлайн- та гібридної освіти, вказано на відмінностях між онлайн- й аудиторним навчанням. Представлено результати досліджень, проведених по закінченню першої хвилі пандемії, а також подано висновки. Проаналізовано відповіді щодо цих форм навчання онлайн-анкет студентів (n=95) (англійської, угорської, української філології) одного із закладів вищої освіти на Закарпатті, зосереджено увагу на відмінностях у процесі опанування мов студентами під час очного та дистанційного навчання. Отримано відповіді на запитання, спрямовані на ставлення студентів до дистанційної освіти, як вони долали труднощі, як справлялися з викликами. Констатовано, що більшість студентів переконані у власному професійному розвитку під час онлайн-навчання під час карантину. Результати підтверджують, що дистанційна освіта має як позитивний, так і негативний вплив на процес навчання. Виявлено, що студенти-інтроверти можуть стати переможцями онлайн-освіти і, за потреби, можуть продовжити навчання в цифровому форматі в майбутньому.

Ключові слова: COVID-19; періоди карантину; навчання під час карантину; дистанційне навчання (ДН); екстрене дистанційне навчання (ЕДН); вища освіта; студентські погляди на ДН; ставлення студентів до ДН; Закарпаття.

Two years after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is common evidence now what impacts it has had on education worldwide. There have been several quarantine periods during which knowledge delivery was realised in an online mode via distance learning (DL). New terms have been coined to better describe the ongoing processes. Thus, quaranteaching is, in fact, online teaching in times of quarantine. Another recent term is emergency remote teaching (ERT) [10], referring to the transition from the in-person teaching mode to online teaching due to some emergency situation, which in 2020 was the swift spread of COVID-19 (this will be further explained below). This influenced all levels of education, from primary to secondary and tertiary. However, little has been found in the academic literature on how higher education students in Transcarpathia reacted to the new normal of DL, and what their perspectives on and attitudes to DL were.

In 2006, Szűcs and Zarka stated that “distance learning in today’s world is an essential component of education” [24, p. 15], but they could not have the slightest idea back then about the truth of this statement in 2020. The construct of distance learning can be defined as learning when students are separated from teachers and peers meaning that students learn remotely and do not have face-to-face learning with instructors or other students [21]. To put

it simply, distance learning is the process when students are separated from teachers and peers and try to learn the new material in an academic discipline. Educators worldwide have made huge efforts to make the transition to distance learning as smooth as possible and are still working diligently today to meet the needs of their students [9]. This shift from in-person to online learning has called the attention to certain questions around the quality of online learning experiences [17], to the fact of how prepared teachers worldwide are to deliver online learning effectively and to the impact that school lockdowns have on both student and teacher wellbeing [7; 18]. Schrenk et al. [22, p. 488] considered that “the change to online learning required that faculty members abruptly change their own mindsets and instructional approaches to prepare effective and engaging online lessons and develop new teaching strategies”. Binanzer et al. [3] conducted a survey in Germany with 166 German as a second language teachers and found that during the COVID-19 lockdown teachers applied communicatively oriented methods less frequently, primarily the learners’ written skills were developed, and teachers believed their students’ competencies in most language skills were unchanged or even reduced.

A great many of studies were carried out to measure student satisfaction with the introduction of online teaching [1; 4; 6; 8; 11; 12; 13; 14; 19; 20; 23; 25]. This was also the main objective of Melnychenko & Zheliaskova’s [16] study conducted among Ukrainian university students (2021). They concluded that their research participants demonstrated positive attitudes to distance learning, which predicted that it should remain after the restrictions in the country due to the pandemic, were over.

With reference to what was said above, Hodges et al. [10] used a new term to more precisely define the situation that arose in 2020 due to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus: “emergency remote teaching” (ERT). In their opinion, this is an alternative method of education that must be switched to due to the emergence of a crisis. The purpose of the ERT is to provide temporary access to education that is reliably available in an emergency or crisis. After the emergency subsides or ceases, education will return to its original form.

Another widely spread term in faculty circles is the hybrid model of education that mixes the traditional face-to-face and distance models. It is also called blended learning, which involves face-to-face and online modes of education. Hybrid education is a mix of online and face-to-face options. Online can include multiple lectures, all of which can be recorded and played back at the students’ convenience, while face-to-face can provide more interaction [2]. Dziuban et al. [5] highlight that blended/hybrid and online education has been (and continues to be) one of the great revolutions of contemporary higher education, which has significant potential to solve many challenges facing the higher education sector. We have learned about several characteristics of online education in the last two school years. Most of the time, the teacher leads the class in a traditional way, if he gives lectures, asks questions either to the whole group or to individual students by name, and waits for the answers in this way. The revolutionary innovation, on the other hand, consists in the fact that the teacher does all this online, so-called creates breakout rooms for pair and group assignments, uses online resources, and sends assignments to students by e-mail [2].

Liebermann [15] lists the essentials of hybrid education. According to him, the teacher should do the following:

- provide the same resources and tasks for students in classroom or distance education;

- emphasize the personalized learning schedule of students;
- put in place concrete strategies to achieve a smooth transition between distance and face-to-face education;
- pay increased attention to the most vulnerable students, and encourage autonomous learning and self-regulation.

However, the central topic of the present article among higher education students in Ukraine is under-researched. Therefore, we have decided to conduct the investigation with the purpose of getting valuable insights into how students experienced distance learning and what their attitudes towards it were like.

The main objective of our research was to collect empirical evidence, get insights into and more deeply understand how students experienced the fact of quaranteaching, what their attitude to DL was and what impacts it had on them.

Altogether 95 students (12 males – 12.6% and 83 females – 84.4%) participated in the research. Their age ranged from 17 to 35+ years. The age group with the highest number of participants was the 17–21 years group, respondents aged 22–27 were eighteen, there were six students in the 28–34 age group, and two participants were older than 35 years. Forty-seven participants majored in English language and literature, 26 students were Hungarian language and literature majors, while 22 respondents majored in Ukrainian language and literature. The distribution of students according to year of study was the following: BA I: 21 (22.1%), II: 21 (22.1%), III: 19 (20%), IV: 12 (12.6%), MA I: 13 (13.7%), II: 9 (9.5%). A vast majority of students had not done any distance learning at all (80–84.2%), while only 15 students (15.8%) admitted they had done some form of online learning before.

An online questionnaire was created in Hungarian (mother tongue of most participants) with the help of Google Forms consisting of three major parts. The first one contained personal questions such as age, gender, major subject, year of study at the college, etc. The second part included questions about the students' attitude to distance learning. There were altogether fourteen statements and students had to indicate on a five-point Likert scale how much they agreed or disagreed with the statements. In the third part of the questionnaire, students were requested to answer open-ended questions about their experience with distance learning during the three months long quarantine in spring, 2020. This part also included the question whether the students would like to continue online learning in the future or not.

The questionnaire was filled in online by 95 daytime students (approximately 50% of the whole daytime language major student population) of the Philology Department of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education majoring in English, Hungarian and Ukrainian. The research tool was prepared in Hungarian, the mother tongue of most of the students. However, they were free to complete it in any language they felt comfortable with. Thus, two questionnaires were in Ukrainian, three in English, and 90 in Hungarian. The research instrument was filled in during a month between 20/05/20 and 20/06/20.

What was the students' attitude toward distance learning?

As can be seen in Table 1, the results reflect the self-declared opinions of the students on how they looked at themselves when learning digitally. More than half of the students (53–56%) took distance learning seriously because they felt it gave them many learning opportunities. On the other hand, 26 (27%) students believed that it was not possible to learn properly online in the way they desired to. The remaining percentage of students could not decide whether online learning had a positive or a negative impact on them.

Table 1

Students' attitudes – how much they agreed with the statements

No	Statements	Disagree	Cannot decide	Agree
1	I took distance learning seriously because it gave me many learning opportunities.	20	22	53
2	I was frivolous about digital education because I believe that it is not possible to learn properly online.	50	19	26
3	I lost my motivation in distance learning because I did not find this form of learning serious.	37	23	35
4	I lost my motivation during distance learning because I did not feel the rigour of the teacher directly.	56	13	26
5	I was more successful in learning online because I could follow my own pace.	36	25	34
6	I will be happy to take part in distance learning in the future.	49	22	24

About the same number of students claimed that they had lost their motivation in DL (35–37%), and that they did not become demotivated during DL (37–39%). Again, the remaining percentage of students (24%) could not decide on this question. The reason for becoming demotivated for 26 (27%) students was the fact that they were not aware of and did not directly feel their tutor's rigour. This finding seems to imply that the teacher's character might play a decisive role in motivating students to learn.

Approximately the same number of students agreed (34–36%) and disagreed (36–38%) with the statement claiming that students were more successful in learning online because they could study at their own pace. For those students who agreed, DL was a real help. However, when asked if they happily took part in DL in the future, only 24 (25%) students replied positively.

When asked directly whether they wanted to continue online learning instead of face-to-face education, there was a great contrast in the students' answers. Table 2 shows that 76% of students (72) were consciously against continuing DL, while 15 (16%) students would willingly continue DL. The low number of students who could not decide if they would like to continue DL or not (8–8%) is evidence of the seriousness and crucial nature of the question demonstrating that almost all the students have their firm beliefs on it.

Table 2

Students' willingness and desire to continue DL

Answers	YES	NOT CERTAIN	NO
Number of students	15	8	72

In what follows below, some opinions are quoted from the questionnaires concerning the question whether students would like to continue DL or not. For the purpose of identifying participants, they were assigned numbers that can be found in parentheses at the end of quotes.

“One of the biggest benefits of distance learning for me was that I was less stressed before a test or exam. Therefore, if it turned out that way, I would be happy to continue distance learning” (Student 31)*.

* Here and hence, the excerpts from the student questionnaires are presented in the authors' translation.

“Yes, I would. Because the schedule is more flexible, I allocate the time myself. In addition to my homework, I had more time outside of the curriculum to study and read. Plus it is possible to work alongside it and it helps a lot in my finances” (Student 37).

“Yes, because it would not be a problem how to commute, and I could allocate my time to myself” (Student 57).

“I would like to. It’s much easier to schedule my own time, to move at my own pace. It is also more stress-free, yet the curriculum can be learned” (Student 74).

“Yes, because it was good to be home, I allocated the time to myself” (Student 86).

“The advantage is that I did not have to travel, I enjoyed studying in a more comfortable home environment, I did not have to go to physical education classes, either” (Student 93).

This subsection presents some quotes from the student questionnaires showing some uncertainty concerning the students’ willingness to continue DL or not.

“In part, it is advantageous, because in this way we did not lag behind the curriculum, but the live education is of better quality and the acquired material is better preserved” (Student 3).

“I can move on with the material at my own pace. I can better schedule my time. I can help more in the household as well. However, the usual college environment, friends, teachers are missing. Many times, a teacher’s explanation would help with learning because it easier to understand the learning material when the teacher has explained it” (Student 58).

Student 58’s example clearly reflects the student’s embarrassment in that on the one hand, they are totally satisfied with the convenience of DL in terms of processing the material to be learnt. On the other hand, however, they miss the feeling of being a member of a community, which is the real lack of DL.

A great many of students (72 out of 95) declared they were categorically against DL. They also expressed their firm beliefs about it in a number of ways. Below, the citations are taken from the questionnaires. After each, their source is presented in parentheses. These quotations have been selected because they are believed to reveal crucial information about the central issue.

“I don’t think distance teaching is effective” (Student 4).

“Personal interactions are more efficient” (Student 8).

“Distance learning is time-consuming” (Student 9).

“No, it is difficult because not everyone has internet access at home, and the teacher’s explanation in person is more easily understood, because he also presents the meaning in practice” (Student 16).

“We do the home assignments all the time but there is no time for the new material. What’s more, we don’t have normal contact with teachers, by which I mean the lack of live classes where we would have the opportunity to listen to the proper explanation of the material or ask our questions” (Student 17).

“The student cannot acquire the material properly in distance teaching” (Student 19).

“It seemed feasible at first, but I don’t think it’s effective at all in the long run. I think every student needs the teacher to explain the material orally live” (Student 24).

“I believe teaching requires a teacher, and all this is lost online, plus the material has to be processed by the student alone and it is sometimes unimaginably stressful because we are not surrounded by social life, which could ease the situation at school, at home, everyone

is self-reliant and has to pass the semester requirements alone” (Student 34).

“No, I think it’s better to be in a social setting. Many electronic devices exhaust the human body, and severely damaging the eyes” (Student 38).

“I don’t want to continue at all. I ran into a lot of problems. I was more frivolous to distance teaching because I was able to solve the tasks more easily with the help of Wikipedia” (Student 41).

“For me, distance learning caused several difficulties, I noticed that I lost my motivation in terms of learning, I thought I discovered more negatives than positives features, such as the fact that my brother and I had a laptop and many times our tests coincided, so we couldn't agree correctly, so one of us always sent in the test late. The other is the stagnation of the internet, but it can also be electricity. A lot of things distracted me from learning, things at home, things to do” (Student 43).

“By no means do I want to continue it. Face-to-face classes are much more likable, they can be filled with more meaningful things. Distance learning is terribly impersonal in nature and in no way replaces classroom-based education” (Student 46).

“This couple of months has been trying everyone’s nervous system. There were more tasks than during regular education. It is harder to learn without lessons. Motivation also decreases over time and as learning takes place at home, there are often other things to do in the meantime. During my online education, I had problems with both English and German, as the material had to be understood / learned with less or no explanation” (Student 51).

“The most negative reply: 1. I didn't like anything 2. I didn't understand anything 3. I had to solve everything alone 4. I forgot everything what I had known 5. Poor sound quality 6. Unsteady internet access 7. Missing the teachers and class 8. Took more time than face-to-face learning” (Student 57).

“I think we take learning in this online form easy, or it can wear out both the students and the teachers” (Student 60).

“These weeks were awful. Even though I allocated my time myself, I had to learn a lot more. I didn’t feel there was any weight to me getting ready, there were some of my teachers who never scored assignments and I didn’t get any feedback from them. It’s only partially related to distance teaching, but I could fall into lethargy because of the lack of company” (Student 66).

“I don’t want to continue. I find the process of learning distantly is much more difficult because learners do not have as much motivation as within the framework of face-to-face education. Also, distance learning is a function of many things, e.g. internet, the proper functioning of technical tools, the lack of which is also an obstacle to effective distance learning” (Student 67).

“It can be harder to focus on learning, mainly because of the work at home. However, the biggest drawback is that there is no teacher explanation, which made learning difficult” (Student 74).

What impact did distance learning during the quarantine in spring, 2020 have on the students?

The most significant positive impact of DL on students was that their digital skills multiplied during the quarantine because they had to master the application of the technology in online lessons in a short time and very quickly (claimed by 53 students – 56%), denied by 29 students (30%) though. Thirteen students (14%) were indecisive (See Table 3).

Table 3

DL impact on students

No	Statements	Disagree	Cannot decide	Agree
1	Online language learning is much more time-consuming than face-to-face learning.	21	18	56
2	Online language learning is much more stressful for me than face-to-face learning.	30	11	54
3	My digital skills multiplied during the quarantine because I had to master the application of the technology in online lessons in a short time and very quickly.	29	13	53
4	Online language learning is much better and more effective for me than face-to-face learning.	60	19	16

A negative outcome of DL was its being more time-consuming (56 students – 59%) than face-to-face education because students had to spend much more time online in front of their digital devices than usual. On the contrary, 21 students (22%) did not consider DL as being time-consuming for them, while 18 students (19%) hesitated about the question. Another harmful effect was the stress caused in the students by DL: 54 students (57%) claimed that they found DL stressful, while only 30 students (31%) admitted they had no problems of such kind with DL. Eleven students (12%) were not certain whether DL was stressful for them or not (See Table 3).

Nevertheless, a vast majority of students (60–63%) disagreed with the statement that online language learning was much better and more effective for them than face-to-face learning. Only 16 students (17%) agreed with it, while 19 students (20%) hesitated about it. This means that most of the language major students at the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education prefer face-to-face learning and teaching to DL or online learning (See Table 3).

Based on the findings of the research, the following conclusions and pedagogical implications have been drawn.

1. More students were persuaded about their own professional development during DL than not.
2. Approximately an equal number of students claimed they had or had not lost their motivation to learn languages during DL.
3. The reason for becoming demotivated is related to the personal or professional character of the teacher.
4. A great majority of students firmly declared they were against continuing DL as an option in the future, the main explanations being: DL is time-consuming, impersonal, ineffective, awful, stressful, difficult, and demotivating.
5. The students' digital skills considerably improved during DL as they had to use various platforms and applications in their online learning.
6. Most students preferred classroom-based learning to DL. Nonetheless, like it or not, the present situation with COVID-19 in Ukraine is such that our students have again been learning online.

Perspectives of further exploration in this field include the investigation of DL influence on the students' physical and mental well-being. In this respect, it is also crucial to survey how quaranteaching in wartime Ukraine impacts students. Another further research direction could be the investigation of student achievement and performance during DL.

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