

# REFLECTIONS ON DISTANCE LEARNING WHEN TEACHING ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN, CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND ADULT LEARNERS AT LANGUAGE SCHOOL DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Bekešová Jana<sup>1</sup>, Jelínková Beáta<sup>2</sup>, Romanová Iveta<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies, Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovak Republic {jane.bekesova@gmail.com}*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies, Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovak Republic {jelinkova321.beata@gmail.com}*

<sup>3</sup>*Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies, Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovak Republic {iva120@gmail.com}*

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 outbreak has undoubtedly caused one of the greatest disruptions to education witnessed in recent history. In an attempt to ensure the educational continuity, many governments, including Slovakia, have quickly transitioned from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning. The paper deals with current issue of COVID-19 pandemic using information and communication technologies for English language distance learning of primary school children, children with special educational needs and adult learners at language schools. First, the instructions on how to proceed in the distance education of primary school children provided by the Ministry of Education are described and a practical overview at the advantages and disadvantages of online lessons, applications and programs is introduced. Second, the challenges of distance learning when teaching English children with special educational needs are also analysed. In order to gain a complex view on the research topic, adult learners' subjective experience on English language distance learning within language school is introduced in the third part of the paper.

## KEYWORDS

*English language, distance learning, primary school children, children with special educational needs, adult learners*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Education of nowadays puts emphasize on creative and modern ways of teaching and learning English, using electronic devices, such as computers, tablets and other multimedia programs or applications, commonly referred to as information and communication technologies. However, it needs to be stressed that their impact was always rather considered within conventional, face-to-face language classes. In the time of worldwide spread COVID-19 pandemic, all the schools in Slovakia were forced to change the way of teaching and learning, and, the integration of information and communication technologies has become crucial during this period for transmitting learning processes directly to learners' homes in order to continue teaching and learning process. As the result, it is important to evaluate challenges that go in a hand with

their use for English language distance learning of primary school children, children with special educational needs and adult learners at language school.

## 2 THEORETICAL PART

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE DISTANCE LEARNING OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Slovak education was most affected by the first wave of COVID-19 in the period from March to June 2020, when all schools were closed. During this period many schools were forced to set certain rules, which were familiar to students and parents. The primary goal was to help students to continue their education. At the same time, the effort to take into account the current challenging situation fully dominated, and therefore uniform rules were set in many Slovak schools (Galeje).

The distance form of education of school pupils took place through electronic communication with pedagogical staff of the school in the following forms:

- through the educational portal EduPage,
- through social networks,
- through e-mail communication,
- using applications, e.g. Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc. (at the discretion of individual teachers).

Pupils followed the timetable and processed the tasks assigned by the teacher according to the schedule determined by the teacher. They were prepared in the form of self-study according to the submitted materials and other sources. The student or parent informed his class teacher about incapacity for work and other reasons that prevented the student from participating in distance education.

To make the teaching process work mutually, each school issued guidelines for teachers on the distance form of education during the lockdown. Teachers of individual subjects gave students assignments (approximately according to the valid timetable) in a reasonable scope and difficulty with the determination of the exact date for study / elaboration:

- new self-study curriculum (e.g. study texts, presentations, ...),
- assignments to practice the curriculum (worksheets, supplements, ...),
- assignments to verify the understanding of the curriculum (tests, checks, ...),
- projects for independent work.

One of the basic findings from March-June 2020 is that there was no one optimal solution for distance education, but the needs were different and very well-functioning solutions in one school might be unusable in another school. No one who was part of the school community could know what measures might work well in a particular school and which ones would not. Therefore, it was best for school management to adapt the measures proposed at national level to the conditions of their particular school. Therefore, Minedu (the Ministry of Education, 2020) has prepared a manual in the form of a structured list of questions, possible answers, and examples of solutions that the school could use in preparing its own plan.

Does the student have access to the Internet at home?

Does the student have a device on which to work with electronically assigned tasks?

Does the student have the necessary skills to work with electronic devices and software?

Is the student able to work with assignments without the direct and continuous support of an adult?

Does the student have access to the printer?

Does the student have a telephone connection?

Does the student have space and conditions for concentrated work at home?

Especially when working with children in the first stage of primary school, the work is more demanding, as their knowledge of the use of ICT, applications and various programs is less than that of older students. Many students had trouble adding an attachment to the email or did not understand the task and therefore required frequent adult help. When learners suddenly stopped responding or when their performance declined, these could be signs of affective disruption. Pupils who did not understand the tasks or felt they lacked the skills or resources to complete, could try to avoid the task (Madjar et al., 2011). Due to this fact the most suitable option for teaching and learning effectively from home was to organize an online lesson (video call).

Today's software offers enough applications or programs that are available for free and allow not only video calls of multiple participants at once, but also sharing materials, attachments, or pictures during the call. ZOOM has become such an application, which has started to be used by an enormous number of teachers and students in Slovakia. Of course, the help of parents or older siblings was needed here as well, given that the installation was in English and that it caused difficulties for almost all children in the first grade. Disadvantages also occurred in the teaching and learning process, namely an intermittent signal, one computer in the household, simultaneous online lessons of several household members, Internet outage. Despite these facts, however, the online lesson was appreciated by both students and parents.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE DISTANCE LEARNING OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Foreign language education of learners with special educational needs (SEN) is one of the language pedagogy fields which constantly demands more attention from researchers since the number of children with various diagnoses, for instance Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dysorthographia, Attention Deficit Disorders (ADD), Attention hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) that are integrated into mainstream schools.

According to the Act 245/2008, §2 of the Slovak Republic, children in mainstream education are classified into following categories:

- **Mainstream learners** are learners without any learning disabilities, behaviour and attention disorders, health impairments or social exclusion.
- **A learner with special educational needs (SEN)** is a learner who has been diagnosed as a SEN, who requires modifications of content, forms, methods, and approaches to the educational process that arise from the health status, learning disabilities, or socially disadvantaged environment in which the learner lives.

Based on the last official statistics from the USA released in 2014, currently one in 59 children suffers from ASD, which corresponds to a 250% increase in the number of cases since 2000 (Data & Statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2019). According to European Union officials, the prevalence in Europe has also grown rapidly, and is currently estimated to be 1 in 89 children (Autism Spectrum Disorders in the European Union). For example, the United States has seven million children between 3–21 years of age who have been receiving special education classes at school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The research made by Starcic (2014) concluded inclusion level of the children with learning disabilities into mainstream schools in the United Kingdom was 28.81 %. In comparison to Slovakia,

according to official statistics of Ministry of the Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, there are about 10 % of special education children at primary schools in the country (Ministry of Education). As the numbers show, there are a lot of SEN learners not only in Slovakia also worldwide who have been affected by CORONA crisis.

While being at school, the education of students with SEN is carried out in accordance with the applicable legislation of Ministry of Education, which was described in above mentioned paragraph. As the guideline fully specifies, teachers need professional advice from psychologists and special education pedagogists who prepare the tailored individualised educational programme and provide recommendations on compensational aids (Kormos and Smith, 2012). As a tool of accommodation of SEN, the electronic devices, for instance, laptops, iPads, smart phones are recommended during the lessons. The educational standards for SEN are the same as for the neurotypical students, only with one difference that their schooling is accomplished with accommodation specified in the Individual Educational Plan. However, SEN learners face a lot of challenges derived from their diagnosis. All above mentioned could be applicable for teaching SEN in school setting. However, SEN learners have to face the abrupt change caused by COVID-19 that has an impact on mental health of children with disabilities because it shifted them to online word without professional help. Commonly termed as social distancing has led to a lack of daily routine and structure, and therefore causing real struggle for children having SEN (Bartlett et al., 2020).

**Kormos and Smith (2012) summarised the challenges of SEN students in regard to foreign language acquisition into following points:**

- a learner has a disability in one or more basic psychological processes, mainly mental processes, for instance memory, seeing and hearing perception and way of thinking,
- a learner has a difficulty in learning, mainly in speaking, listening, writing, and reading,
- a learner has obstacles between a learner's abilities and a low level of performance.

Commonly known feature of SEN learners is their low adaptability and flexibility, be more specific, sudden changes cause SEN learner panic. These children enjoy prepared activities, routine, pre-arranged scenarios because predictable activities help them overcome anxiety and lessen their frustration (Van Eylen, 2011).

While online classes seem to be favourable for most students, little is known about its psychological impact on SEN learners. A lack of routine and the attached uncertainty can make children with Autism Spectrum Disorder feel more anxious and depressed because they need routine and planned activities. Tandon (2020), in their work has pointed out the relation between COVID-19 and psychiatry, and vice versa. Experiencing negative emotions, changes in moods, and changes in the sleeping and eating patterns of children put them at a greater risk of experiencing worsening mental health issues. Shifting classes online leads to more burden to their parents that often replace teachers and professionals with insufficient help. Parents have to manage SEN learners time, do online homework task that levels their stress and frustration and thus negatively affect their children. As an immediate remedy, guidelines by UNICEF providing resources on children with disability during COVID-19 can be effectively followed (UNICEF, 2020).

Finally, we ought to mention the huge group of SEN learners in Slovakia, despite not suffering from any diagnosis, who are educated in the form of inclusion because they come from socially disadvantaged environment. Some disadvantages of online education were pointed out by the Institute of Educational Policy with cooperation the National Institute of Certified Measurements of Education at Primary and Secondary Schools conducted a survey which found that up to 52,000 pupils in Slovakia did not participate

in online education during COVID-19. The reason for this failure was either a connection problem or a missing technique. This group mostly included students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Sme.sk).

### Research methodology

We used the interview as a research method to find out the biggest issue which facing the SEN learners during CORONA crisis.

Our research sample included seven SEN learners, having diagnosis included in Table 1, for example: Asperger syndrome, ADHD, ADD, Dyslexia, Dysorthographia and Dysgraphia.

**Table 1: Research sample**

Name	Age	Diagnoses	Recommendations according to IEP on tests
Rudko	12	Asperger syndrome	Short test with Yes/No answer, multiply choice, prolonged time for testing, in his bad days to prefer oral exams, prolonged time for testing
Roman	11	ADD, Dysortographia	Prolonged time for testing, accept spelling mistakes
Filip	10	ADHD	Prolonged time for testing, demand only basic knowledge
Peter	11	Dyslexia, Dysortographia, Dysgraphia	Prefer oral to written tests, accept spelling mistakes
Matej	11	ADD, Dysgraphia	Prolonged time for testing
Alex	13	Dysortographia	Accept grammar mistakes
Evelyn	10	Dysgraphia, Dysortographia	Prolonged time for testing, accept spelling mistakes in writing

Parents provided us the Individualized Educational Programmes of their children and we scrutinised only recommendations for teaching a foreign language. As the table shows, prolonged time for testing, acceptance of spelling or grammar mistakes are frequently advice to meet their needs. Parents of SEN students of our research sample answered the following questions:

Interview question:

1. Name the issues in distance learning of your child?
2. What impact does the distance learning have on your child behaviour?
3. What do you have to do to help your child?

Interview questions were processed by quantitative analysis - Inductive Content Analysis of Coding and summarised in the tables below.

**Table 2: Distance learning issues from parents' point of view**

Distance learning issues
time management
tendency to spend more time on computer
social insulation
lack of routine
lack of specialist's consultations

missing peers
behavioural issues

Parents reported that they used to face above mentioned issues of their children before CORONA pandemics, however, distance learning increased the level of those issues. The biggest problem parents see the loss of daily routine and lack of consultations with psychologist and special pedagogists who provide therapies to their children.

**Table 3: Child behavioural issues in distance learning issues from parents' point of view**

<b>Child behavioural issues</b>
anxiety
frequent tantrums
bad mood
depression
overwhelming
frequent distractions
refusal doing homework

According to parents, distance learning of their SEN children led to more frequent behavioural problems, for instance anxiety, tantrums, frustration, refusal to do homework, bad mood and even though in some cases suffering from depression.

**Table 4: Parents help to their children in distance learning**

<b>Parents have to help</b>
to check homework assignment
to write down notes
to help with project tasks
to search the information
to be physically present on online lessons
to schedule daily tasks
to follow teacher's instructions

Parents feel that they have more duties than before CORONA pandemics. Despite the fact they used to help their children with learning and doing homework. For example, parents have to supply teacher's assistant to follow assignment and activities during online lesson. To better understand the subject, they are often present on online lessons with their children.

To sum up, the distance learning of SEN learners is not so beneficial for SEN learners in comparison to other groups of learners. The loss of the routine and lack of services lead to worsening the behaviour of

SEN learners. Most of SEN learners reported that they would like to return to school because they do not want to do so much homework. Parents reported that they feel overwhelmed and frustrated to be a parent and an educator at the same time. In addition, they feel exhausted from constant care of their children. They feel guilty because their well-being is directly connected to worsening their child behavioural issues. To prevent the tantrum, they do not force their children to do every school homework and accept the worsening the marks.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE DISTANCE LEARNING OF ADULT LEARNERS AT LANGUAGE SCHOOL

The massive transmission of learning processes from conventional to fully remote language classes, using the information and communication technologies, has affected also non-formal educational institutions such as language schools. Besides other differences, it needs to be stressed that while within formal education, learners often belong to the same age group, non-formal educational institutions usually include learners of all age groups, including the adult ones. In the previous part, numerous challenges of English language distance learning of primary school children and children with special educational needs were introduced. In the following part, we are rather interested in the challenges of English language distance learning that the adult learners attending language school must face to. Being able to analyse their perception, five adult English learners (from 45 to 63 years old) at B2 level, were addressed to write down their thoughts in a form of diary during the first wave of COVID-19 in the period from March to June 2020.

First, majority of them reported technological issues as a major challenge. While using information and communication technologies within face-to-face classes increases their motivation and engagement, their implementation for English language distance learning decreases it due to the fact that they have to face to numerous technological problems, as it was reported in the learner's diary: *„It is motivational to use information and communication technologies within standard conditions of language classes, however, now I perceive them rather as a tool for connection with the teacher, and not as the tool for learning English“* or *„In my opinion, I spend too much time dealing with technological failures when trying to connect and this time could be spend by learning English“*. Overall, while for young learners, who are commonly referred to as digital natives, it might be natural to solve technological issues by themselves, some of the adult learners may feel like they do not have the expertise or abilities to participate in English language distance learning and, as the result, their learning experience becomes negative. In addition, one of the learner pointed also the change in the use of information and communication technologies, when stated: *„Actually, I use my smart phone and laptop just for joining online classes where I follow only my coursebook, and not for learning English as I was used to before, this is quite boring“*. This opinion might refer to the fact that while using information and communication technologies has already become natural part of face-to-face classes, their implementation for English language distance learning is not that common.

Second, learners stressed in their diaries that it is difficult to maintain intrinsic motivation for English language distance learning, especially due to the loss of goal setting and progress monitoring. According to their notes, they would appreciate if the teacher would pay more attention to setting clear goals and providing feedback about their progress, otherwise they are rapidly losing their motivation. Overall, students felt that when they are learning English remotely, they require more expert guidance, in this case from a language teacher who could be perceived as an advisor that helps them to achieve increased autonomy by making them aware of the learning process, their own learning styles, strategies and attitudes. Undoubtedly, the immediate shift from conventional to fully virtual learning due to the COVID-19

pandemic has caused that self-directed learning could be considered as a crucial skill for remote language learning. Based on our experience, some learners found it motivating to direct their learning, supported by learner's experience, when noted: *"Before school closure, I limited my English learning to time blocks of 60 minutes per week, waiting for what teacher is going to teach me within class, and, nowadays, I am learning English in accordance with my own interests I have set for myself and teacher is helping me to achieve these goals"*. On the other hand, some of them would have preferred more coordination and assignments to give their language learning direction, as stated: *"I am missing more guidance from my language teacher because I struggle to keep myself motivated and focused when I am learning English alone"*. It could be also assumed that the teacher should not forget to positively appreciate students during online learning through awards, certificates, points and to give them motivation, support and guidance they need to achieve the desired outcomes.

Third, language development is undoubtedly a social construct that requires peer interaction that might be also underestimated in context of COVID-19 pandemic. When language is processed, our understanding is simultaneously framed from the context of the conversation and the body language of the person with whom we are speaking. However, body language can be also missing in online language learning, what was also confirmed in learner's diary: *"I prefer classroom learning over virtual classes because my English develops much more in daily interactions with teacher and peers, as I do not feel self-confident to speak online, sometimes even without the possibility to see each other"*. This means that learners have to use a lot of extra attention, effort, and energy in order to contextualize and fully understand peer's interaction via video chat. In English language distance learning, learners reported that they have become exhausted by the effort of trying to interact with others through artificial medium that blocks many of the natural cues we use to understand language and emotions.

## CONCLUSION

Currently, there is a huge pressure on the informatization of education. It was the pandemic situation that occurred and persists that it has brought new challenges to teaching and learning for teachers, students and families. (Reimers et al., 2020).

The aim of the paper was to provide an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of distance education of primary school children, special needs children and language school students, and to consider the possibilities of online teaching for a specific category of students based on the recommendations of the Ministry of Education, learners and parents' reports.

Learners of the stages mentioned above have enriched and increased their knowledge of using new online programs and applications, and, according to Carter et al. (2020), there may be other elements important to young learners that have yet to be discovered, especially in models that take into account differences in cognition and motivation in the presence of advanced technologies.

Although the pandemic hit most schools unprepared and led to a significant disruption of the normal teaching process, the level of modern education has moved forward on the recommendations of the Ministry of Education, digitization, prompt response and the initiative of teachers, pupils and their parents.

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