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TEACHING INDEPENDENT LISTENING COMPREHENSION ONLINE: FINDINGS OF THE PRELIMINARY STUDY

Abstract. The article addresses the issue of teaching independent listening comprehension in the emergency distance education (EDE) caused by Covid-19 pandemic. The paper describes the preliminary study of developing university students' listening skills in on-line instruction mode. The authors consider the main challenges that practitioners face while building students' listening skills. These include difficulties ranging from text selection, linguistic and conceptual complexities of authentic audio/video materials and task construction to organizing listening practice beyond the classroom as well as checking students' comprehension upon listening/viewing. The hypothesis of the research states that due to the enhanced digital literacy of teachers and learners as a result of EDE listening could be practiced effectively in the asynchronous format as an independent activity. This would allow learners a certain degree of autonomy and would spare the virtual contact time for practicing oral production and interaction in the synchronous mode. The authors have surveyed 75 second-year students of Linguistics at three Ukrainian universities to elicit their perceptions of the on-line instruction effects on the development of four language skills and listening in particular. The survey also gave the possibility to elicit preferences in topics, text types and sources in independent listening practice, as well as views on organization of independent listening (frequency of listening practice sessions, length of texts, etc.). The survey findings presented in this article helped the authors to outline the parameters of the independent listening that would benefit the development of students' listening skills and consequently develop the methodology of teaching these skills independently. The latter has already been designed and implemented in practice, thus making up a focus of further research.

Keywords: teaching listening comprehension; online instruction; independent listening.

1. INTRODUCTION

Problem statement. Listening, which is the primary mother tongue skill that develops naturally during individuals' early life, appears to be notoriously demanding in L2 acquisition. Building listening skills in the classroom environment is fraught with multiple

difficulties that range from issues linked to psychology of listening as a mental process to the issues of facilitating a quality presentation of audio/video texts including rate of speech and number of replays.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Being referred to as “a problematic skill” [1], as “a Cinderella skill” which “all too often has been overlooked by its elder sister: speaking” [2], listening has been addressed in a relatively limited number of theoretical studies (D. Nunan [3], A. Anderson and T. Lynch [4], G. Buck [5], J. Field [1], [6], T. Lynch [7], P. Ur [8]). Although evidently under-researched by theoreticians, this skill is considered in detail in the CEFR 2020 [9] and is included in all current language curricula. It is taught and assessed in the classroom on a day-to-day basis and therefore should not be overlooked by both theoreticians and practitioners.

With the pandemic-forced transition to remote instruction in 2020, teachers from across the globe had to adjust their teaching strategies to the new online mode. Clearly, this mode has affected the teaching of all four skills [10], introducing essential changes to the teaching content and its delivery as well as to the assessment *for* and *of* learning. Researchers across the globe responded to the issues raised by the emergency distance education (EDE) exploring this phenomenon from multiple perspectives [11].

The research goal. Responding to the above-mentioned impetus, this article aims to explore the situation around teaching listening skills in the university classroom. In this paper we will focus on the preliminary phase of the study, with the main study offering a methodology of teaching listening comprehension tailored to learners’ needs and affordances of on-line instruction to be covered in the article to follow.

2. THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The development of L2 listening skills unfolds on the basis of a complex of intertwined physiological and psychological mechanisms/processes that make listening “the most difficult skill to teach” [12]. The primary challenge confronted by teachers of listening pertains to the selection of audio/video texts, which are to be further framed as meaningful and exciting classroom activities. Text selection procedures have been addressed by every instructor and/or researcher seeking to teach listening, of no exception are the authors of this article R.Radchuk (Vikovych) [13] and Y. Trykashna [14].

Given the aural/visual channel of perceiving listening texts, the selection basically proceeds from considering the input media through which the listening texts are presented to listeners. Those include traditional audio/video recordings, multimedia as well as the internet, which encompasses diverse sources such as podcasts, news, films, vlogs, etc. The media from which texts are selected pre-determine text characteristics such as duration, and, more importantly, the concentration of the sought content and relevant language within the desired time span. In this respect podcasts are generally difficult to utilize [15] in terms of selecting the most relevant fragments of the long-playing texts and editing them to match the pragmatic classroom needs and learners’ proficiency level. Even YouTube, which provides unending sources of authentic materials, poses difficulties in terms of keeping under control, for instance, linguistic idiosyncrasies of speakers (use of slang and idioms, etc.) that might not be quite appropriate for the age and cultural background of the students. As is clear from the above, text selection creates a serious challenge to the instructors who are rarely knowledgeable about how to package authentic materials in order to create effective listening activities for their students [10].

Another area of concern for practitioners relates to tackling linguistic and conceptual complexities of authentic audio/video materials. Universally accepted is the necessity to engage students in pre-listening activities whose purpose is to activate students’ schemata,

psychological mechanisms such as long-term memory and anticipation, as well as activate their background language knowledge and skills. Among a plethora of tasks a teacher needs to solve on the preparation stage R. Blake points to deciding “which words are to be glossed, what cultural information is essential to understanding the video, which pragmatic and sociolinguistic considerations are assumed to be common knowledge for the listener, and, most importantly, what follow-up activities can be generated beyond the mere act of aural comprehension so as to continue to put into practice the specific language routines learned during the listening activities” [10, p.132].

Obviously, the overwhelming majority of instructors prefer to work from teacher’s books, which provide detailed outlines of pre-, while- and post-listening activities. A certain part of teachers, however, feel inspired to craft their own listening activities based on self-selected texts and media; such teachers are quite confident in using technologies when it comes to designing and editing texts, and creating exciting activities around them. Yet, even those who are knowledgeable in the technology application still need continuous training in keeping up-to-date with more recent advances and affordances.

Although certain happy solutions to efficient application of internet resources were offered to the technology-literate teachers within Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) approach by P. Donaldson and A. Haggstorm [16], K. Kohn [17], E.A.Hellmich [18], these solutions remain the province of professionals united in special interest groups (e.g., CALL SIG of the Japan Association of Language Teaching, or European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning). The technological innovations offered by CALL have been applied in teaching listening skills by H. Nachoua [19], H.Meihamiet [20], W. Yaiche [21], K. Khoiriyah [22], but they have not as yet reached a broad community of practicing teachers, probably because this process requires major reformation of the syllabi and approaches to instruction [15].

Apart from application of technologies, teaching listening has yet another unresolved issue immediately related to language pedagogy. This refers to checking students’ comprehension upon listening/viewing. The approach to comprehension check via setting post-listening tasks in the format of tests has created an impression that listening is not taught but only tested [15]. In cases when listening comprehension is chosen to be checked in the whole-class or small-team discussion, measuring the outcomes of listening is downplayed in favour of the outcomes of speaking produced in the discussion (e.g. R.Vikovych [13]). As a result of such speculations, assessment of listening should be made consistent with the objectives of teaching this skill and, additionally, the optimal formats of assessment should be empirically established [23]. On the whole, the mentioned challenges are only a few of those typically encountered by practicing teachers.

The issues of teaching/assessing listening skills considered above are viewed as the most characteristic of face-to-face classes in the pre-pandemic era. The new circumstances of 2020, which led to EDE, have drastically changed language learning and teaching [24], [25], [26]. Although distance education, remote learning and on-line instruction had not been absolutely new by that time, there had been an essential if not a fundamental difference between the regular and the forced on-line modes of instruction. First, the teachers who were typically engaged in regular distance education had been sufficiently trained and competent in curriculum and materials design as well as in the implementation of teaching and assessment. Second, there is a clear contrast between the purposes of regular distance education and EDE. The first one has been viewed as a beneficial alternative to traditional face-to-face mode since it broke territorial and temporal boundaries, symbolised flexibility of education and enhanced learner autonomy. EDE ‘broke out’ due to the unprecedented circumstances, was forced/mandated and did not allow any time to comprehend the goings-on at a time when both learners and instructors were threatened by serious health risks.

No one of the authors of this article had been experienced in on-line instruction before the EDE, so like thousands of our colleagues, we had to struggle with the dramatic transformations in our professional setting to maintain appropriate instruction. However, the shared research interest – teaching and assessing listening comprehension – urged us to critically evaluate the new situation and the affordances it has provided as far as teaching of the skill based on and inseparable from internet technologies is concerned. The *hypothesis* that we developed is as follows: given the enhanced digital literacy of both teachers and learners as a result of EDE, listening could be practiced in the asynchronous format as independent activity. This would allow the learners a certain degree of autonomy and would free up the virtual contact time for practicing oral production and interaction in the synchronous mode. The development of this hypothesis led us to setting the following research questions (RQ) for the preliminary phase of the study:

RQ1. What are the advantages/disadvantages of online learning English as perceived by the students responding to our survey?

RQ2. What parameters of independent listening (text types, sources, topics as well as frequency of listening and the degree of autonomy) are perceived as preferable by learners?

The resolution of the research questions will give a possibility to take into account learners' opinions and develop effective methods to teach and assess independent listening.

3. METHODS

The research methodology includes the employment of a questionnaire and descriptive analysis of the data obtained.

Questionnaire

Overall, the questionnaire intended to find out the attitude of students of Linguistics to on-line instruction. Specifically, it aimed to elicit the platforms and websites that the students became familiar with and tended to use during EDE. More importantly, we sought to elicit and analyze students' perceptions of the on-line instruction effects on a number of selected language skills, students' preferences in independent listening in terms of topics, text types, and sources as well as their views on organization of listening beyond the classroom. The data obtained during the preparatory phase of the study were to be used as a base for the further developed methods of implementing and assessing independent listening.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions including seven selected response questions, two open-ended and one question requesting rank-ordering.

Before administering the survey, we tested the questionnaire with the help of three fellow teachers and five students, who gave their feedback on the wording and length of questions, format of questions and their appropriateness/unsuitability. The feedback was taken into consideration to finalise the questionnaire.

The survey was conducted online with the help of Google Forms. To interpret the data obtained through the questionnaire, we employed the descriptive analysis method.

Participants

The participants in the survey were 75 students of three Ukrainian universities (Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Lviv Polytechnic National University and Ivan Franko National University of Lviv). Participation in the survey was anonymous and voluntary. The questionnaire was formulated in English although the students were allowed to answer the open-ended questions in their mother tongue to ensure their full answers. Nonetheless, nearly all of the participants (95%) preferred to present their views in English.

4. FINDINGS

The resolution of RQ1 was based on the answers to Q1-4. *Question 1* purported to elicit information about the students' attitude towards online instruction, in particular its advantages and challenges. Open-ended format of the question provided students' expanded answers. The advantageous aspects of distance learning were demonstrated through a total of 35 comments, the disadvantageous aspects - through 30 comments, and the option "not at all" got 14 responses.

The main arguments that the respondents gave in favour of distance learning were: sparing time on commuting to university in favour of spending more time for self-study; feeling more comfortable and safe studying from home during the pandemic; opportunity to attend (online) classes even if they were sick and could not leave home. Some respondents presume that students' attendance has increased due to online learning, e.g., *"Even with the extensive use of technology, I've become more organized, responsible, and self-disciplined. I have already adapted to distance learning, and it is very convenient for me. In my opinion, I master the material well"*. However, having mentioned advantageous aspects of distance learning 5% of the students point out that they would go for offline learning.

Among the challenges and drawbacks of learning English online the majority of the respondents noted technical issues, such as poor Internet connection and audibility, possibility of cheating, as well as lack of live communication between teacher and students, e.g. *"There's no live communication; sometimes technologies let down and due to technical problems you miss a class. Assessment is unfair sometimes as some students cheat copying or reading from the screen"*.

Another focus of the questionnaire was language skills that had been positively/negatively affected by online instruction. Thus, *Question 2* purported to elicit the degree of satisfaction with online learning of such skills as reading, writing, speaking and listening. The data of descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Perceived positive impact of on-line instruction on skills development

	Totally disagree (%)	Quite disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Quite agree (%)	Totally agree (%)
Reading	8	6	37	26	20
Writing	10	9	25	40	12
Speaking	13	9	34	18	22
Listening	16	14	21	26	20

As is seen in the table, the most significant positive impact of the on-line instruction was made on the development of writing skills (a total of 52% of satisfaction). Both receptive skills (reading and listening) shared the second position with a total of 46 % each. Speaking received the lowest value of 40%. Of interest are also the percentages of disagreement with the positive impact, which in the case of reading are the lowest (14%) and in the case of listening - the highest (30%). Quite significant are the percentages in the column for undecided perceptions that range from 21% (for listening) to 37% (for reading).

Question 3 inquired about the degree of dissatisfaction with the effects of online instruction on the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. The results of participants' answers are presented in Table 2.

The findings show that only the minor part of students was totally or quite dissatisfied with the development of all four language skills. The majority of students totally disagreed that online learning had negatively affected their language skills development; the overall least negative effects were made on learning reading (58), followed by writing (51), speaking

(48) and listening (28). The percentages of undecided answers were somewhat lower than in the identical column in the previous table although comprising from 1/5 to 1/4 of the total numbers.

Table 2.

Perceived negative impact of on-line instruction on skills development

	Totally disagree (%)	Quite disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Quite agree (%)	Totally agree (%)
Reading	41	17	25	5	5
Writing	33	18	28	6	8
Speaking	30	18	28	12	5
Listening	14	14	22	17	8

Question 4 aimed to reveal the skills the development of which was provided with better opportunities in online instruction (web resources/materials, accessibility, interesting content etc.). The descriptive data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Provision of enhanced opportunities in online instruction

	Totally disagree (%)	Quite disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Quite agree (%)	Totally agree (%)
Reading	2	7	10	30	23
Writing	3	14	21	19	14
Speaking	11	7	15	22	17
Listening	2	9	11	24	25

According to the data, the development of reading skills enjoyed the best opportunities (53%) in terms of interesting materials, their accessibility and quality content. Listening closely followed reading with 49%. Surprisingly, speaking was provided with better opportunities for development than writing (39% vs 33%). The percentages of undecided answers appear the lowest of the Tables 1-3.

Based on the analysis of the data presented in Tables 1-3, we interpret the students' perceptions of on-line instruction efficiency in the following way. Obviously, the online mode is associated by the students with the increased necessity to write, i.e. to type in English, hence the index of 52% of positive impact of the on-line learning mode on this skill. As far as the positively impacted skills of reading and listening are concerned, 46% of agreement are coupled with quite significant percentages of undecidedness (37% in the case of reading and 21% in the case of listening). On these grounds we may assert that the respondents were not confident in their answers and could decide differently under different circumstances. If we compare these values with the indexes of the negative impact, we will see a quite controversial picture. Listening appeared to be the most negatively affected by the online mode of instruction (25%) and reading – the least (10%). Here we cannot ignore the quite high percentages of undecidedness in the cases of all four skills, which again are indicative of the respondents' uncertainty. The negative impact of online learning mode on the development of listening skills seems surprising and may be interpreted in two ways. First, it may suggest that the students mostly considered the possible poor audibility during online classes. Second, it may be that in respondents' practice listening was limited to "teacher – students" mode of communication and excluded listening to a variety of authentic texts available online. This suggestion seems rightful in the light of the responses concerning quite high values for provision of interesting and stimulating materials for reading and listening. More specifically, we found out that listening did not enjoy the multiple opportunities for practice which the online mode of instruction offered to the full advantage.

Additionally to resolving RQ1, we managed to obtain the information about the online platforms and websites that the respondents used during distance learning.

Question 5 aimed to elicit what online platforms the students had used while learning English. The question offered selected responses with the option “own answer”. It appeared that the most widely used online platform was Quizlet (87% of responses), 36 % of the students used Abc Puzzle English, 24 % used Kahoot, and 8% - Padlet. Among other platforms the students mentioned Tongo, Moodle, English Lab, Lingoda, Ted Talks. Such platforms as MindMap and Flippity appeared completely unfamiliar to the respondents.

Question 6 inquired about educational websites that the students used for practicing listening in English. The results of the survey showed that the most popular online resource was YouTube with 94% of the respondents. BBC Learning English was in the second place in popularity with 51%, Duolingo was used by 44% of the respondents, while British Council Learn English by 32% and Breaking News English by 17% of the learners respectively. Among other websites and resources inconsiderable percentage of the respondents mentioned Deutsche Welle, Bussu, Netflix and Coursera.

Based on the data obtained here, we may conclude that the respondents were familiar with a wide range of online platforms and resources and that they may further be efficiently used in developing the methodology of independent listening.

RQ2 “What parameters of independent listening will be preferred by the learners (text types, sources, topics as well as frequency of listening and the degree of autonomy)?” was resolved based on the answers to Questions 7-10.

Question 7 was a 5-option Likert type question inviting students to reflect on their perceptions of the necessity of independent listening and the circumstances under which students would eagerly practice it. The responses to this question are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.

Perceptions of independent listening procedure

	Totally Disagree	Quite disagree	Undecided	Quite Agree	Totally agree
I tend to listen to audio/video recordings quite often – once a week or so	4	8	20	21	45
I would practice independent listening if I were provided with some <i>useful tips</i> (e.g., links to interesting resources)	4	5	21	38	29
I <i>wouldn't practice</i> independent listening as I am happy with listening activities in the classroom	30	29	20	6	8
Independent listening <i>is useful</i> even though the teacher doesn't check it	17	8	12	12	50
Independent listening would be more useful if we <i>discussed</i> it with classmates <i>in the classroom</i>	5	16	26	21	36
Independent listening is <i>useless</i> because what is <i>not checked</i> is rarely done regularly	48	17	16	9	6
Independent listening should be done totally independently	18	16	36	20	8

The data obtained from this question show that the majority of the students (62) consider independent listening to be useful and would practice it, especially if they were provided with necessary materials (67). A big part of the survey participants believe that independent listening is useful whether it is checked by the teacher or not (62), however most

of them agree that it would be more effective if they discussed in the classroom what they had listened to individually (57). 18 respondents totally disagreed and 16 quite disagreed that listening should be done totally independently, 36 responded that they were undecided, thus we may infer that independent listening should be supervised by the teacher to reach its highest efficiency.

Question 8 was a selected response one intending to find out the details of possible independent listening, such as: a) the topics the students would prefer to listen to independently, b) frequency of listening sessions per week, c) preferable length of texts and d) forms of comprehension/performance check.

a) As for the topics, 64% of the participants noted that they would choose listening texts on the topics they were interested in even though the texts were too difficult for their level. 33 % would choose texts from the several suggested by the teacher and about 3% would choose the texts that their classmates advised them. b) Regarding the preferred frequency of independent listening sessions, we found out that 47% would do independent listening at least 3 times a week; 46% would listen independently once or twice a week and 7% would practice independent listening only once in two weeks. c) In terms of text length, 33 % of the respondents would choose short (up to 3 minutes) texts; 57% would prefer to listen to texts up to 10 minutes long and 10% would choose 40-minute-long texts. d) When it comes to the forms of checking the independent listening, 61% of the respondents would rather have oral comprehension check via discussion/presentation (in the virtual/live classroom), 30% opted for comprehension check via written test (via Google Classroom or other platform) and 8% preferred comprehension check via writing a summary (via Google Classroom or other platforms).

Question 9 aimed to elicit information about types of audio/video texts that the students would prefer for independent listening. The findings of the survey show that the majority (89%) would opt for episodes of TV series/films. A big part of students would prefer interviews and songs with 79% each. 65% of the respondents would choose educational videos, 61% would prefer watching TV programmes, 44% – news, 42% – lectures on professional topics and 23% – announcements (See Figure 1).

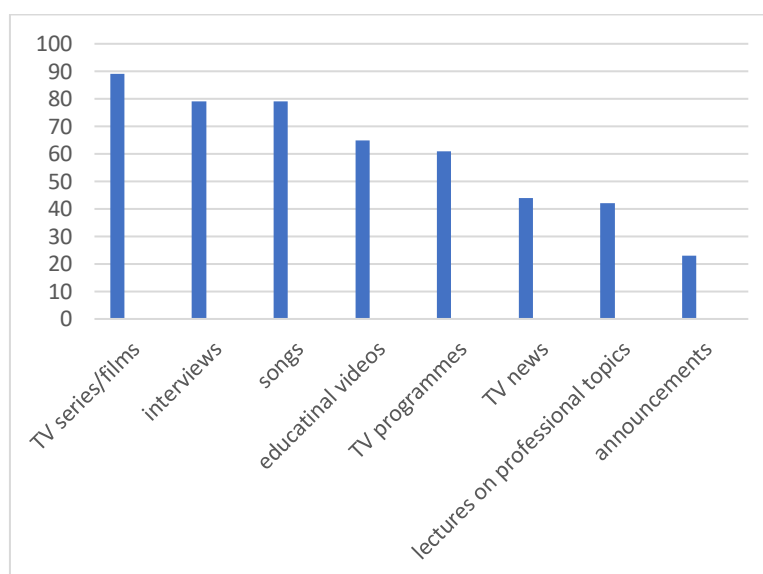


Figure1. Preferred listening text types

Question 10 inquired about the skills that would be positively affected by regular independent listening. The largest part of the respondents (90%) believed they would increase

their vocabulary, 87% would enhance their pronunciation, 81% would develop their skills to understand the gist, 76% would improve the skills to understand details and specific information, 68% would master their skills to understand unknown words/expressions in the context, 61% would enhance sociocultural skills, 54% would strengthen skills of critical evaluation of information and building own opinion of it and finally, 50% of the respondents would progress in rendering the information from the listening text in oral or written form (See Figure 2).

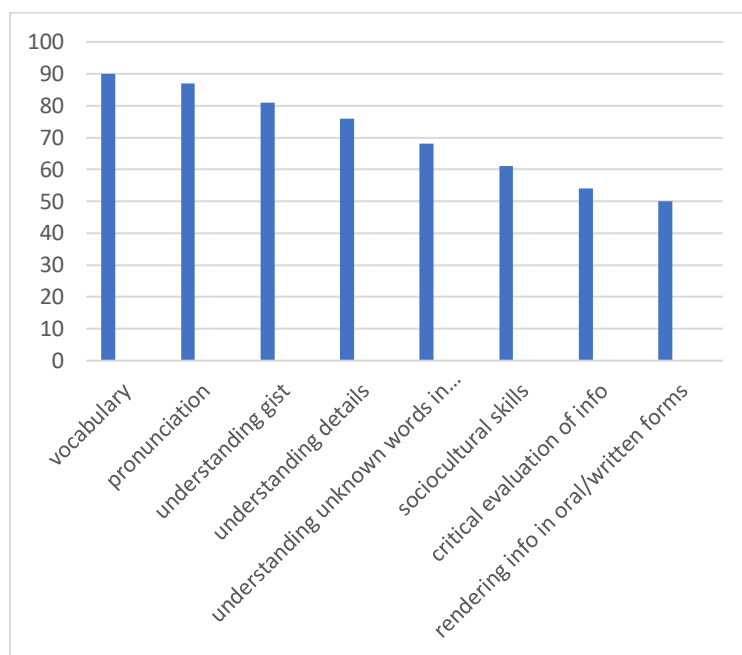


Figure 2. Impact of independent listening on the development of skills

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The data obtained through qualitative analysis of responses and descriptive statistics allowed us to arrive at the following conclusions.

Being aware of the affordances of online instruction, on the whole, the respondents feel that face-to-face instruction has certain advantages, such as irreplaceable impact of live communication and interaction in the classroom. The respondents ascertained that the development of all foreign language skills had been both positively and negatively affected by the online instruction mode. However, they felt that listening was provided with the second best after reading opportunities for online learning.

The survey demonstrated that the respondents were familiar with a wide range of web resources. In terms of resources for practicing listening/video-listening, the first place was occupied by YouTube. Such resources as BBC Learning English, Duolingo, British Council Learn English and Breaking News English, although not so popular as YouTube, appeared to be familiar and used by a considerable percentage of the respondents. This fact suggests that the respondents do not listen/watch for entertainment only but seek ways to systemically work at their listening skills. It appears that they would appreciate a variety of opportunities/materials offered to them in case they were tailored to their tastes and language proficiency.

We also managed to detect that the majority of the respondents would practice independent listening provided it was monitored by the teacher to good measure. The five

most preferred listening/viewing text types appeared to be fragments of TV series/films, interviews, songs, educational videos and TV programmes. These, as part of the respondents claimed, should be selected and offered to students by the teacher. Worth mentioning is the respondents' expressed willingness to practice listening to/viewing preferred texts even if their linguistic difficulty exceeded students' actual language proficiency. This opinion opens up the possibility of utilizing quite complex authentic listening/viewing texts for independent listening. The respondents' answers, however, suggest that the duration of authentic texts should be limited to 10 minutes. The students also limit the ultimate independence of practicing listening to checking it in some of the forms – as oral discussion in class or testing comprehension via some online platform. Finally, the respondents associate the outcomes of independent listening with improving their vocabulary and pronunciation, understanding for gist and details, as well as enhancing sociocultural skills.

The survey presented in this article helped us outline the parameters of the independent listening that would benefit the development of students' listening skills. The further research that builds on this study consists in developing a methodology of developing online listening skills of 2nd year students majoring in linguistics. The details of the intervention conducted by us together with the findings and implications for teaching/assessing independent listening will make the focus of our following article.

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НАВЧАННЯ САМОСТІЙНОГО АУДІОВАННЯ ОНЛАЙН: РЕЗУЛЬТАТИ ПОПЕРЕДНЬОГО ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ

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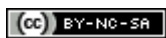
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Анотація. У статті розглядається питання самостійного навчання аудіювання в умовах екстреної дистанційної освіти (ЕДО), спричиненої пандемією Covid 19. У центрі уваги даного дослідження є розвиток умінь аудіювання студентів вищих навчальних мовних закладів у режимі онлайн навчання. Автори дослідження висвітлюють основні проблеми, з

якими стикаються викладачі під час розвитку вмінь аудіювання, навчаючи англійської мови як іноземної. Вони охоплюють широкий спектр труднощів, які варіюються залежно від вибору текстів, лінгвістичних та змістовних труднощів автентичних аудіо/відеоматеріалів та розробки завдань до організації навчання аудіювання за межами аудиторії та перевірки розуміння студентами прослуханого/переглянутого матеріалу. Гіпотеза дослідження полягає в тому, що завдяки підвищенню цифрової грамотності викладачів та студентів у результаті ЕДО аудіювання можна практикувати в асинхронному форматі як самостійну діяльність. Це надало б студентам певної автономії та додатковий час для відтворення інформації в усній формі в синхронному режимі. Автори провели опитування 75-ти студентів мовних спеціальностей трьох українських університетів, щоб виявити та проаналізувати рівень сприйняття студентами онлайн навчання, уподобання студентів щодо самостійного аудіювання (СА) (теми, типи текстів, джерела тощо), а також їх ставлення до організації СА за межами аудиторії (частота СА, тривалість текстів тощо). Результати опитування, представлені у цій статті, допомогли авторам окреслити параметри СА, корисні для розвитку вмінь студентів в аудіюванні, а також розробити ефективну методику навчання СА.

Ключові слова: навчання розуміння на слух; онлайн навчання; самостійне слухання.



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