Maximizing University Students' Spoken Interaction in English within the Distance Learning Framework in Wartime

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Abstract. *This qualitative case study aims to examine and probe the effectiveness of a series of methods of maximizing university students' spoken interaction in English, in the context of the course "English for Professional Communication" taught remotely, under war conditions. The study seeks to provide ways of developing university students' spoken interaction skills under the observed conditions of online learning, by looking at learning needs, psychological implications, current challenges, and available virtual resources and digital tools. Among the proposed methods and techniques, we mention digital breakouts, virtual field trips, video creation, video conferencing, group projects and information exchange activities, online games and QR-codes, which were probed in the course "English for Professional Communication". The results of the study prove the effectiveness of the presented methods in increasing the level of university students' English spoken interaction skills within the distance learning framework during wartime.*

Keywords: *English spoken interaction, university students, distance learning, wartime, virtual resources, digital tools*

Introduction

Having already been reshaped by the pandemic, the lives of Ukrainians continue to be profoundly influenced by the ongoing war. In difficult conditions when face-to-face learning and teaching are impossible, educators are striving to engage their students in diverse activities during online lessons. Being deprived of real communication, they pay considerable attention to the development of spoken interaction.

It is often difficult for educators to switch over to digital and distance learning. They need to find different platforms and apps and learn how to use them. On top of that, it can be challenging to come up with digital learning resources students enjoy and to make them available on Google Classroom or during a Zoom meeting using the screen share feature. Digital educational resources are tools and content that use technology to enhance learning, instructional materials aiming to support and enrich the educational process in a digital environment. These include educational games, videos, QR-codes, boom cards, and digital worksheets and they transform the classroom

activities into an interactive, gamified learning experience which also provides data to track progress and identify learning gaps.

The article aims to research the implementation of digital tools in the English for specific purposes (ESP) classes within the distance learning framework in wartime and to track its influence on university students' spoken interaction in English.

Theoretical Background

Distance learning comprises all teaching and learning carried out online, both synchronously and asynchronously. Its benefits and drawbacks had been thoroughly researched long before the outbreak of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. Scientists scrutinized topics such as available online courses, among which one of the best known is Moodle, computer-assisted assessment (Duke-Williams & King 2001; Dmitrenko et al. 2023), video-tutorials integrated into face-to-face courses (Ellington & Hardin 2008), online courses design (Keeler & Horney 2007), and others. They mentioned some of the advantages of distance learning such as flexibility, accessibility, and cost-efficiency. Kim and Bonk (2006) were among the many who speculated about the future of online learning. In 2006 they concluded that distance learning was entering a fascinating stage and believed that "… perhaps the perfect e-storm is becoming less cloudy and ominous (Kim & Bonk 23)."

But the COVID-19 pandemic induced teachers all over the world to turn their attention to emergency remote instruction and to interact with their students, notwithstanding their age, desire, and possibilities, only virtually. This rapid change, which was due to unpredictable circumstances, was viewed as an ideal way out of the existing situation. The researchers who had investigated the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning (Lamanauskas & Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė 2021; Yuniastari & da Silva 2022; Kostikova et al. 2023; Dmitrenko et al. 2024) described it as an efficient solution for delivering education during quarantine. Still, it demonstrated the vulnerability of the educational system, pointing out many disadvantages of online learning. Researchers cite students' weaker motivation (Debeş 2021), teachers' stress (Klapproth et al. 2020), and the ineffectiveness of teachers' methods and approaches (Nashir & Laili 2021), to name a few. Yuniastari and da Silva (2022) emphasized that lack of communication, declining health, and apathy, were among the major complaints students raised against online education.

While the global educational system has already overcome the results of an emergency transfer to distance learning during the COVID-19 outbreak, Ukrainian teachers are still struggling to deliver knowledge to their students mostly virtually. The war has impacted the situation even more seriously and drastically. The concern for the safety of the participants and the

impossibility of delivering education offline because of the continuous Russian aggression are the major causes for prolonging distance learning in Ukraine. Students and teachers have been scattered around the world, seeking temporary shelter. Quite often, they are in different time zones, which also impacts the necessity of distance learning.

Although nowadays it is considered achievable to conduct lessons online, as the teaching community is more experienced in implementing distance learning than before the COVID-19, there are other hindrances such as technical problems related to frequent cuts of electricity, air alerts, and psychological issues. For scared and devastated students and teachers, distance learning has become akin to psychotherapy, as it provides a unique chance for communication, every online meeting starting with the question "How are you?". Online conferences link the participants virtually, giving them a chance to exchange news and share their feelings, and distract them from the appalling atmosphere of war. But, at the same time, war inevitably impacts people's mood, motivation, and behaviour. Students and teachers have been on an emotional roller-coaster since the beginning of the war, which also affects the quality of distance learning and of spoken interaction.

The analysis of methodological studies confirmed that the endeavour to maximize university students' spoken interaction in English within the distance learning framework in wartime presents unique challenges but is achievable with thoughtful strategies and approaches. Popular video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet have been used by Ukrainian teachers for online meetings and group discussions, establishing regular sessions where students, as well as teachers, can interact synchronously. At present teachers have improved their practical skills in utilizing video conferencing platforms for maximizing spoken interaction in English, as presented in the studies of Smyth (2009), Zaiarna (2021) and others.

Ekblaw (2017), Mok and Noor (2022), Roberts and Taylor (2005) described creating virtual group projects for students to collaborate on English language projects, problem-based tasks, project presentations, or discussions related to their coursework. Cassany (2015), Hakan and Hakan (2021), and Moore (2016) created online forums or chat groups for discussing course-related topics and encouraged students to actively participate and exchange ideas in English using online forums and chats. Shawaqfeh et al. (2023), Kim (2020), Dueñas, Cardozo and Peña (2015) described how language development courses are an effective approach to maximizing students' spoken interaction in remote online learning. The scholars provided specialized courses to enhance students' language skills and incorporated pronunciation exercises, reading, writing, and listening activities in English. Morton, Gunson and Jack (2012), Dmitrenko et al.

(2021), Zhou (2023), Duong and Pham (2022) suggested implementing interactive teaching methods, such as games, role-plays, or debates to stimulate English communication and increase student motivation during spoken interaction.

The use of native speakers in view of increasing students' spoken interaction was showcased in some research; e.g. Chakowa (2019), Chacón (2022) invited native English speakers to online sessions with students for communication practice and real-life language use and stated the positive impact of the experience on students' speaking proficiency. Aubrey, King and Almukhaild (2020), and Afifah and Devana (2020) assigned students self-study tasks such as writing essays, reports, or analysing texts in English to encourage immersion in the language.

The effectiveness of creating interactive digital materials was proved in several studies (Yulihar, Husein & Dewi 2018; Mahdi 2022; Ionițiu 2023), which presented the interactive video lessons, exercises, and games developed to facilitate English learning and communication practice and to empower students to make the most of the opportunities for learning and practicing English speaking in the distance learning framework.

Methodology

This qualitative case study aims to examine and probe the effectiveness of a series of methods of maximizing university students' spoken interaction in English, in the context of the course "English for Professional Communication" taught remotely, under war conditions. The research question guiding this study is:

How did the implementation of digital tools in the ESP classes in conditions of remote learning during the war influence university students' spoken interaction in English?

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, employing informal unstructured interviews and as instruments to collect data. The qualitative case study design is valuable for comprehending the complexity of the issue by exploring participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

Activities sample

1) First of all, teachers use different videoconferencing platforms which can provide access to resources for training and development from anywhere. The most popular video conferencing platforms are Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. Those platforms have been of great help since the very beginning of distance learning. Most teachers have been using them to keep in touch and network with students as there is need for interaction, sharing news, exchanging information, and simply seeing that students are safe and sound.

In the case of videoconferencing, methods such as discussion and role-plays are often used. Students can communicate on any topic and discuss different concepts and problems. Role-plays especially help with learning new lexical topics. Those methods help students overcome language barriers, they reduce psychological pressure and significantly increase the amount of speaking practice.

2) Virtual reality can be advantageous for providing a change of pace while teaching remotely and making online lessons vibrant, relevant, and fun. Virtual reality provides a unique and immersive learning experience, realistic environments where students interact with other participants as they do in real life. It has proven to be a powerful tool for increasing motivation and building trust in language learners, whether classes are held in person or online and this emphasis on developing communication and confidence is a crucial factor in students' development. It provides a safe and controlled environment for conducting various training simulations. It is possible to use a unique virtual reality software platform such as Immerse for synchronous learning and learning in the ELT (English language teaching) sector.

The project method can be used to help students succeed in learning a foreign language. For example, students are given QR-codes, each of them containing a link to virtual tours of museums or online art exhibitions. After watching the materials, students can work on the following projects: to record the video excursion around the city where they live, to conduct different interviews, or to create a project about popular museums in their country. In this case, the teacher only promotes the development of critical and creative thinking of students.
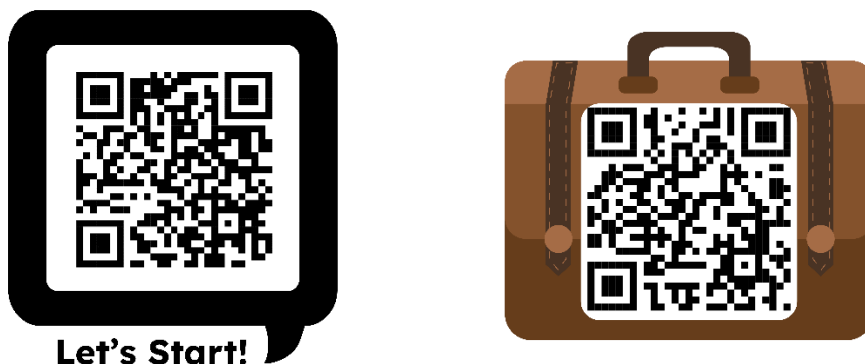

Figure 1: QR-codes with Louvre virtual tour and exhibition at the British Museum *(public domain): https://me-qr.com/uk*

3)   Nowadays, students cannot imagine their lives without mobile devices, then why not ask them to download different applications which they can use during and after lessons to improve their skills. English-speaking applications can be incredibly helpful as they serve as talking digital companions, assisting students in refining their accents and speaking more naturally. In this case, it is possible to use applications such as Mondly, Busu, Kansei, and Tandem as they give freedom to learn anywhere and anytime, offer a variety of free lessons, activities, and resources, and increase productivity and motivation.

This third method is listening as an active type of speech activity and an element of dialogic speech. The use of apps accompanies the development of speaking skills because, in reality, communication relies on listening. Whether a student is typing or speaking, the digital friend adapts to their style, offering natural, human-like conversations that cater to their learning preferences.
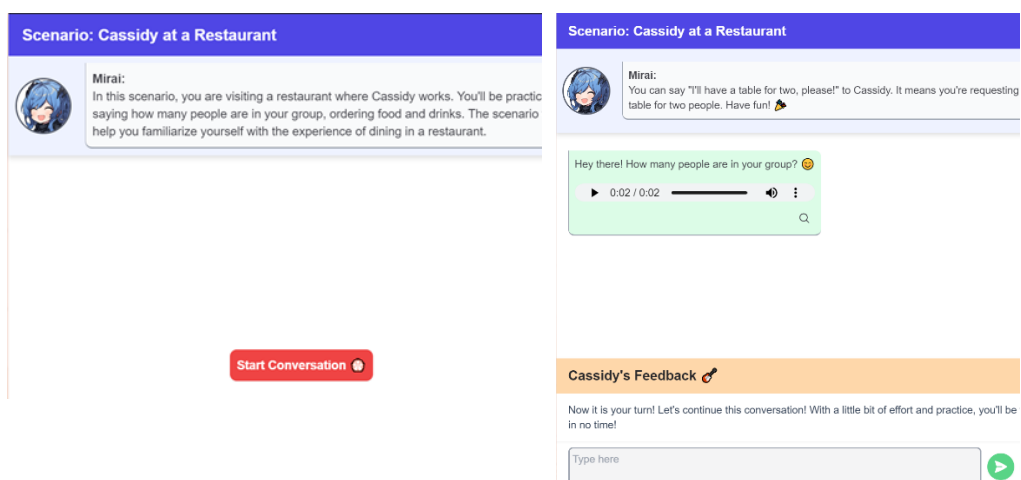
Figure 2: Example of conversation using application *Kansei* (these figures were created by authors to show students how *Kansei* app is working) *(public domain): https://chat.kansei.app/account*

Participants
Second-year university students were invited to be part of this study. During the study, digital tools were introduced into their curriculum. Out of the 48 students, 8 agreed to participate in interviews over one semester while taking the course "English for Professional Communication" remotely. The course included both synchronous and asynchronous elements and was conducted under war conditions in the 2022-2023 academic year. These students, pre-service teachers of History, with an English proficiency ranging from B1 to

B2, were doing a course of English for Professional Communication at Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University. The interview participants were 18 years old, six of them self-identified as female and two as male. Four of these students had experienced displacement, either by living abroad or by relocating to different cities within Ukraine, as a result of the ongoing crisis sparked by Russian aggression on the Ukrainian territory. The students were informed about the goals, tasks, and conditions of training and participated voluntarily.

Data Collection Methods
University instructors who had integrated digital tools into their training classes for the course "English for Professional Communication" to maximize spoken interaction, dedicated 10 minutes at the end of one class each month to interview participants. They asked them to share their experiences and reflections on the implementation of digital tools, specifically focusing on their impact on spoken interaction in English. During these informal unstructured interviews, conducted in an online format, the instructors used a set of carefully crafted questions to gather insights from the students. To facilitate collaboration and feedback, they documented the data from their interviews as well as their insights in an online shared document.

Data Analysis
In the analysis phase, an inductive approach was adopted in three stages. Firstly, the raw data was condensed by scanning it multiple times to identify key patterns. In the second stage, the condensed texts were labelled and described, linking them to the research questions. Lastly, conclusions were drawn through a recursive process, with emerging findings cross-checked against existing publications for trustworthiness, measurability, and validity, aligning with the recommendations of Azungah and Kasmad (2018) and Yin (2017). Simultaneously, the results of the interviews cross-checked with the before and after assessment of students' speaking skills.

The collaborative platform, where the university teachers documented their observations and insights via an online shared document, facilitated ongoing collaboration and observation. This approach allowed all instructors to observe and compare the results of the interviews, fostering a collective understanding of the impact of digital tools on maximizing university students' spoken interaction in English.

Results and Discussion
After receiving and analysing the participants' feedback, the results could be presented, and conclusions could be drawn. Being interested in the impact of distance learning on students' spoken interaction, we asked students and

teachers to share their opinions about the issue. Their answers confirmed the results of other studies (Yuniastari & da Silva 2022) about the deterioration in English speaking skills and communication between students during online classes. We will analyse below the students' feedback.

Excerpt 1.
How did distance learning impact your speaking skills and communication during the English classes?
Four in eight students who agreed to participate in the survey preferred online classes to offline ones because of the safety issues. Here is what some of them mentioned:

> "For me, it is sometimes impossible to discuss "peaceful" topics because there is a marked contrast between what is happening in my country and the things we have to discuss. And I am glad to study online as I am staying with my family in this horrific time."

> "My parents worry a lot. They can't imagine me going to a different city because they are afraid. They say that staying in my small native village is much safer, and we are together here."

Two participants were disappointed with remote learning. They would rather have offline learning as it gives them more opportunities to interact. Here is what one of them uttered:

> "I am mostly dissatisfied with distance learning as I seldom have any opportunity to exchange my opinion with other students. You have to raise your hand and wait obediently for your turn to say something. Sometimes I have a lot to say but I see "raised hands" on my screen, so I have to cut myself short…"

Two students hesitated, debating what to say. On one hand, they approved of online learning and on the other hand they indicated some of its negative features.

> "I am not very talkative, so for me distance learning is perfect. The teacher and outgoing students usually do the talking. I just wait patiently for my turn to speak. And I feel quite uncomfortable when speaking because there are no usual classroom sounds, only your voice is heard, and the teacher seems to be following your answer so attentively…"

> "Remote learning is the perfect choice for me as it saves time and gives me an opportunity to work at my own pace, though I can admit I would like more spoken interaction."

Teachers had similar attitudes to remote learning, agreeing on its positive and negative features. Considering safety as the most important issue while dealing with teaching in wartime, they would rather have offline classes to develop their students' speaking skills and interaction.

> "Communication in class largely depends on the number of students, my rapport with them, psychological factors, and technical issues. I mean that if you didn't sleep a wink at night because of the air alert or read some terrible news on social media about the war victims, it is difficult to make yourself or others speak. This tension influences students' interaction enormously."

> "Of course, safety is important. But when I sit and stare at the black screen of my computer, trying to persuade my students to speak, I feel hopeless…"

> "I disagree with my colleagues who are frustrated with remote learning and would be happy to have offline classes now. Some students are just shy and are not very talkative. They would be quiet in any case. And with modern technology, you can always find something that helps your students interact."

These results are similar to the findings of Yuniastari and da Silva (2022), Debeş (2021), Mok and Noor (2022), Nashir and Laili (2021).

Students and lecturers were also asked to share their opinions about the video conferencing platforms which had been used for hosting online meetings. Both students and lecturers found Zoom the best place for online meetings. The major advantage for increasing spoken interaction was the availability to split a Zoom meeting into separate sessions for discussions, projects, and group work.

Excerpt 2.
Which video conferencing platforms for hosting online meetings do you consider the best for spoken interaction?
Six students mentioned breakout rooms as a true advantage of Zoom meetings. Five of them named the possibility of having a discussion without a teacher present as the main benefit of this video conferencing platform, and one student also preferred the interface of Zoom. Students emphasized that it

was less stressful and more relaxing to talk in a separate breakout room without a teacher whose presence many consider "a bit disturbing" or even "authoritative". Students highly praised the opportunity to work in small groups, especially if they had the chance to choose their breakout room participants on their own instead of them being appointed by the teacher. Here are some examples of these students' answers:

> "I think Zoom is the best as the teacher could divide us into several groups and we were able to have a discussion without the teacher's presence."

> "Splitting students into several smaller groups in Zoom I find just marvellous. With online learning, the teacher mostly does the talking, which I personally view as authoritative. And we rarely have a chance to speak because there are so many students in the group, and you should wait for your turn to switch on the sound and speak."

> "As for me, Zoom is better than Google Meet. In small groups, especially when we have a chance to choose our group mates, it is much easier to interact. I feel more relaxed than in the crowded class with a teacher following your every word."

Although two students appreciated online learning and expressed positivity towards Zoom, they were somehow disappointed with the breakout rooms.

> "I think all platforms are wonderful. You can see and hear everyone as if you were in a real class. It's not a problem for me to speak. I even think that it is more organized as it gives you an opportunity to think about what to say, and while listening you compare your opinion with others. When you are ready, just raise your hand and speak. In breakout rooms, it may be too noisy as everyone switches on their micros and starts speaking at the same time. And they often don't use English as they are willing to just to exchange some news."

> "After having used Zoom for more than two years now, I think it is the best video conferencing platform to have English, though, to be honest, I don't like to be in breakout rooms. Some people seem to seize the opportunity to have some tea or do nothing instead of talking."

Teachers also favoured Zoom because of the possibility to give students an extra opportunity to speak freely, without a teacher's presence. They also

mentioned the necessity of giving students the precise task before sending them to the breakout room.

> "Now it really doesn't matter to me what video conferencing platform we use. As I use Google Classroom with my students, I prefer having Google Meet. But if I want my students to interact freely, the number of students in the group is too big, or the role-play is involved, I will definitely choose Zoom. Sending students to interact in breakout rooms is a perfect idea. But you should remember to give them a definite task and ask them to present the discussion results when they are back."

> "I am absolutely sure that Zoom with its breakout rooms is a perfect choice to maximize students' spoken interaction. I observed that my students feel uncomfortable to speak when everybody is waiting for their answer. But for some students, it does not matter what platform we use. Then I prefer to use Google Meet as it is linked to Google Classroom, it is just a question of habit and personal preference. We even sing songs in Google Meet."

> "Making students speak and participate in the discussion is a tough task nowadays. They are under a lot of pressure nowadays; they are reluctant to respond to their group mates' remarks, need more time to think, and prefer to avoid speaking if this is possible. Sending students to breakout rooms, I give them a chance to choose the members and it creates a more relaxed atmosphere."

Due to the frequent power cuts and air alerts in Ukraine, lessons could end quite abruptly. This often prevented students from interacting or finishing the assignment in time. When in the mentioned circumstances they did not have the possibility to complete the task during the lesson, they often scheduled a Zoom meeting on their own and collaborated in small groups. If students had the task to role-play a dialogue or to prepare a project on a given topic, they also preferred to meet on Zoom to discuss and share their ideas at a convenient time after classes. The lecturers mentioned Google Meet as the most convenient app for providing lectures because it gives access to 100 participants and more, it allows to share screens with several participants simultaneously, and is integrated with Google Calendar, allowing to schedule and manage meetings, which are easy to join. The major advantage of Google Meet is its integration with Google Classroom, ensuring that students can always access links to online meetings. However, the teachers named the

difficulties in sharing the sound and the impossibility of grouping students for spoken interaction as the main disadvantages of the platform.

The next question probed which digital tools or resources the participants found useful for developing communication skills. Considering the advantages of online learning in wartime, the students mentioned virtual reality, which opened up new possibilities for studying and entertainment. They could plunge into the virtual world and get amazing impressions. Whether it was immersive gaming or virtual adventure, VR empowered entertainment by creating a more engaging and interactive experience. Virtual reality has proven to be a powerful tool for increasing the motivation and interaction between students. It gave teachers the opportunity to distract students from their daily routines and fears.

Excerpt 3.
What digital tools or resources do you find useful for improving spoken interaction in English?
According to participants' answers, during online lessons, they were especially fond of having activities where they could tour different places, visit museums or art exhibitions online. These virtual tours allowed users to stay safe. In general, students were eager to present to the group mates the information they had gathered observing virtual tours. Having the possibility to create personal virtual tours of their own homes or the cities / towns they lived in, some students were more engaged and interested as it gave them the possibility to introduce themselves to others, whereas others felt so worried and uncomfortable that they never switched on their cameras.
Three students mentioned virtual trips as a great tool to learn some information about Great Britain and London, and to exchange their feelings and emotions.

> "I liked virtual tours of museums. I don't have the possibility to travel now, and I really miss walking the streets of European cities, visiting museums, art galleries. With friends, we remembered being in different places, spoke about funny moments we had had before the war, and dreamt of the trips we would be able to have in the future."

> "I particularly enjoyed the 360-degree virtual trip around London. It was absolutely stunning!"

> "Being able to explore London from the comfort of your room after a night air alert was an incredible experience. Later we discussed the attractions we had seen and shared our dreams about the places we would visit after the war. It was truly exciting."

Two students were reluctant to discuss the visited places as it was quite traumatic for them either because of memories or because they understood that it was impossible to go there at present.

> "I don't like these virtual trips. Because of the war, I can't go anywhere. So, what is the point of watching it and dreaming?"

> "Three years ago, I visited London. I was there with my groupmates. Where are they now? Will we ever meet? We were so happy then…"

As a considerable number of Ukrainian students found shelter in different European countries, they faced the difficulty of having to use English more often in their everyday life than before. It wasn't enough for them to interact with other students during the lesson, and they wanted more. But if there was time zone difference, it was quite difficult to agree with someone on the time to meet online. So, some students mentioned utilizing various applications to enhance their English speaking skills. Answering the question about their favourite app which helps them in their interaction with people and increases their speaking fluency, the participants named Tandem, one of the most popular language exchange programs. The concept of this app was simple for students: it brought together students who were learning English as a foreign language with native English speakers who were trying to learn another language. The idea was that a learner and an English-speaking partner exchanged language skills and it was possible to do this at any time which was convenient for them.

> "I preferred Tandem to communicate with people in English. There were many people who were eager to learn Ukrainian or some information about our country. In exchange, I had the opportunity to speak English with native speakers, which was great."

Six students also enjoyed using other English-speaking applications (Mondly, Busu, Immerse) to improve their speaking skills. Two students tried these applications but later stopped using them. Here are some of their opinions:

> "For me VR platform Immerse was perfect. It allowed me to practise English with real people in different locations."

> "I don't really like these platforms. Communicating with strangers is not my cup of tea."

"I think I am easily distracted and lazy, that's why these applications are not for me. I prefer games and virtual trips more."

Moreover, students were fond of playing educational games, working with worksheets and QR-codes. They were of great importance and could be used in the classroom to persuade students to use language rather than just thinking about learning the right forms. Students became so involved in discussion, role-plays, and debates that they forgot about everything, and this encouraged them to communicate, collaborate, be creative, be less anxious, express their thoughts more accurately and logically, as well as to understand the reactions and points of view of other people. For those who were shy, it was a good tool that helped them to overcome shyness and develop the ability to communicate with others.

The combination of classwork and everyday use of these apps led to a positive dynamic in developing English speaking skills, made students more confident and maximized their interaction during online meetings. The students' and lecturers' opinions about the usefulness of digital tools or resources in improving spoken interaction in English align with those of many other researchers in the field (Yulihar, Husein & Dewi 2018; Mahdi 2022; Ionițiu 2023).

Limitations

Due to the small sample size (N=8), the results of the qualitative case study cannot be generalized to the entire population. Therefore, this study should be considered as an exploratory investigation aimed at identifying possible issues and trends for further research.

Conclusions

The study discusses learner benefits of distance learning, such as safety, psychological support, geographical accessibility, choice of ways to access course material (including smartphones and tablets), flexibility and self-motivation through self-directed learning, and membership in a virtual community, which especially allows asynchronous participation. The main challenges of remote learning identified in the study are the lack of face-to-face communication with peers, passivity, difficulties in using digital tools, problems with the internet connection, and low motivation.

The paper describes several digital tools which were approbated for the remote online learning of ESP. They help to create a learning environment where students can access materials anytime and anywhere, which makes the learning process interesting, inclusive, and motivating for continuous education and lifelong learning.

It is concluded that the main benefits of remote online learning under war conditions, in our opinion, are safety, flexibility, and the possibility of delivering education wherever the learners are. At the same time, the challenge consists in the digital adaptation of traditional methods (for instance, debates), so they will not lose meaningfulness and keep being convenient for learners and educators in the context of online and blended learning.

It was noticed that the use of different digital tools during the lesson encourages students to develop their speaking skills, work on shared projects, exchange ideas and solve problems in real time, cooperate effectively and share responsibility, learn how to express their thoughts and ideas through various media formats while developing their own individuality. The use of online resources allows students to gain knowledge independently and process information by using appropriate digital tools.

Thus, the study results prove the effectiveness of methods such as videoconferencing, digital breakouts, collaborative brainstorming, group projects and video creation, role-plays, information exchange activities, online games, virtual field trips and QR-codes in increasing the level of university students' spoken interaction skills in English, within distance learning, during wartime.

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