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ELT IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: THE BOUNDARIES AND BEYOND

ELT in Cultural Contexts: Tradition and Challenges Reassessed

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Abstract

In line with the tenets of evidence-based research, this article reports several experiments that cast light on benefits and shortcomings of ELT strategies as well as their outcomes. The case study of such programs in Ukraine may serve both a model and a warning light for educators in other countries who seek to meet challenges of teaching English in the rapidly changing environment.

Keywords: ELT; EFL teaching; evidence-based research; Empirical Stylistics.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century the importance of learning foreign languages, English in particular, is beyond any debate, and the worldwide tendency looks clear enough: knowing English facilitates integrating into on-going communication about universal concerns. The world is indeed going global; yet, controversially, the situation in various areas remains unequal, and in what follows we will refrain from speculative judgements on the matter in favour of evidence-based findings – primarily on the case-study of Ukraine, the country in Eastern Europe the author of this article comes from.

In the European Union, every second citizen speaks English either as their L1 or L2 (Keating 2020). In other contexts, the proportion may not look that optimistic. Thus, in Ukraine a very rough figure gathered by means of a street-poll in downtown Kyiv, the capital, points to the fact that not more than 20 % of residents have an English language proficiency at a level sufficient for maintaining casual communication (Sergeyeva and Chesnokova 2008: 284). In this survey, twenty-eight randomly chosen people were approached in English with a request for directions to popular sight-seeing places – something you are expected to be able to supply once you possess the adequate language skills. Sadly, just four respondents demonstrated the appropriate English communication skills while two more were able to speak the language well enough to respond to the request. It is reasonable to assume that if the survey had been carried out not in the central part of the Ukrainian capital, but in a rural area, the figures would have been much lower.

Quite in line with the data, the self-perceived ability of Ukrainians to support a conversation in English is below average and equals just 3.7 on a scale of 10, alternating between low and moderate

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(Ukraine 2020). At the same time, optimistically enough, as many as 70 % of Ukrainians, regardless of their competence level, indicate English as a foreign language they speak.

Europe today is becoming still more and more multilingual, especially when the younger generation is concerned. According to the data collected in the Eurobarometer survey (European Commission 2018), young Europeans mostly speak more than one language, but still do not consider their competence satisfactory. Although there is a lot of variation between the European countries, 77 % of the respondents would like to learn yet a new language, while 84 % would like to improve their command. The distribution of the most and least popular tongues seems not to be surprising. Thus, English is the language that 64 % of young Europeans would like to improve the most, and Spanish is the most frequently mentioned (35 %) one by the respondents who would like to learn one more language. The fact that proficiency in English is currently an obvious practical benefit remains uncontroversial, and in most countries, there is a wide offer of formats and price options to master the language. The outcome remains predominantly a matter of persistence and personal motivation.

With all the data taken into consideration, in what follows we will focus on three crucial ELT questions:

- (1) why (to teach English);
- (2) how (to teach English) and
- (3) what (to do with ELT in COVID times).

LEARNING ENGLISH IN THE 21ST CENTURY: BENEFITS AND INCENTIVES

The necessity to learn or improve one's English proficiency is obvious enough, and not all the countries are content with the existing state of the matters. There are three main factors mentioned by the European respondents as *discouragement* from language learning: lack of time (34 %), lack of motivation (30 %) and expense of language classes (22 %) (European Commission 2006: 5).

Similarly, in this section we will analyse the main factors accountable for the English language competence or its deficiency in Ukraine (Sergeyeva and Chesnokova 2008: 284): educational, motivational, economic, geopolitical and emotional.

The *educational* factor is rooted in inability of secondary school programs across the country, especially in rural and less privileged urban areas, to supply learners with sufficient knowledge of the language patterns as well as adequate communication skills. It is reasonable to expect that more than ten years of language tuition an average Ukrainian gets on a mandatory basis will result in a level of English language expertise that is sufficient for both work-related and personal needs of the learners. By contrast, the figures presented in the previous section testify to the opposite.

The *motivational* factor presupposes that employment opportunities are significantly better for job-seekers who indicate in their CV's, among other skills, fluency in English: currently for many positions in the market businesses, especially IT, global trade or HORECA, require knowledge of the language. Kantar TNS Online Track (2021) indicates the English language as most needed for personal

growth (90 %) and most desirable to study at schools as L2 (95 %). Thus, it is viewed as a step towards better-paid jobs, wider choice of positions and faster promotion.

The *economic* factor is definitely at play as, apart from English classes at government-funded schools and universities, alternative forms and formats of mastering the language require considerable investment – the one, which will pay back in the future. Thus, though money is a potential motivation for language learning, it is at the same time an obstacle one must accept when decision to learn a language is taken.

As various countries of the world are characterized by different *geopolitical* situations, this factor is additionally responsible for the level of the English language competence of their citizens. Even though geographically Ukraine is located in the centre of Europe – the region where English is widely taught and spoken – politically the country is still on its way to the European community. In this respect, it is essential to mention that until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the borders of Ukraine, just like those of all other then-Soviet republics, were quite deprived of Western influence, which resulted in lack of an English language environment that would make the learning process more natural. At the same time, although political and cultural impact of the West (the United States in particular) on Ukraine in the 21st century has dramatically increased, especially in the last decade, the level of English language knowledge, as indicated earlier in this article, still cannot catch up with the influence.

Finally, the *emotional* factor implies that learning English can be either enhanced or hindered by the attitude to it. Positive emotions in ELT are an extra motivation that accounts for success in acquiring the skills while negative ones can be partly blamed for failing to do so. As Ukrainians tend to evaluate learning English as an interesting, but not very pleasant pursuit (Sergeyeva and Chesnokova 2008: 294), this emotional misbalance can serve an additional factor why ELT in the country is still on its way to perfection.

With the listed factors in mind, educationalists in the country work on optimal ways of teaching English as well as motivating learners to cooperate with the tutors. Basic formats of ELT at secondary schools in many ways comply with international standards, and the country is speedily harmonizing its university system with global educational canons. Following current interdisciplinary tendencies, ELT at the university level allows some room for innovation either at national or at institutional levels where educators are free to choose the practices which serve their needs best – not without the need to later legalise them through bureaucratic establishments. To be competitive on the international market of higher education, the curricula of EFL subjects in Ukraine are regularly updated according to the rapidly evolving modern trends. The content is adapted while the issue of quality becomes more and more important. To this end, in the following sections of this article we will look at several such options that have demonstrated their viability in the Ukrainian context.

ELT THROUGH EMPIRICAL STYLISTICS: A CASE STUDY OF DICKINSON

In most Ukrainian universities, parallel to mastering the language *per se*, English Stylistics is taught, and this approach has demonstrated its obvious benefits. It argues that the analytical precision offered by Stylistics courses is valuable for EFL learners who often have a better grasp of structural elements of language than learners in monolingual native English contexts (Chesnokova and Yakuba 2011).

In Ukraine, a course of Stylistics is a mandatory element of a BA program in General Philology. Even outside Stylistics classes, students are expected to be able to unpack a certain metaphor and demonstrate their literary competence as, while mastering the language, they are exposed to passages from canonical literary works. The EFL manuals traditionally include fragments from textual sources serving as models of authentic language use, and such methodology provides non-native learners with important historical and cultural contexts alongside with development of their language skills. As a result, non-native speakers of English show deep knowledge of English literature and profound penetration in the texts they deal with. For them as EFL students, language learning and reading literature are the two facets of a single process that brings positive results, developing both communication skills and cultural background.

Apart from more traditional approach, Empirical Stylistics (Fialho, Zyngier and Burke 2016; Chesnokova 2016; Chesnokova and Zyngier, forthcoming) tools and methods are seen to enhance the students' language awareness and skills in interpreting texts – the skill that is crucial to EFL learners. Further on we describe, in an evidence-based way, a case of teaching EFL students Stylistics by way of empirically testing their sensitivity to lexical repetition in poetry.

In the reported experiment, which was conducted in a conventional academic setting, undergraduate learners were confronted with Poem 809 by Emily Dickinson:

*Unable are the Loved to die
For Love is Immortality,
Nay, it is Deity –*

*Unable they that Love – to die
For Love reforms Vitality
Into Divinity (Johnson 1961: 394).*

The poem is organized in two stanzas, three lines in each, and it is clearly rich in repetition at different levels, the lexical reiteration being the most conspicuous. In just six lines, Dickinson uses the lemma 'love' four times. Additionally, both stanzas anaphorically open with 'Unable', and the second line in each stanza starts with 'For Love'. At the same time, the epiphoric 'to die' closes the initial lines in both stanzas in a frame-like structure.

Syntactically, the parallel elements 'Unable ... to die' and 'For Love + verb in Present Simple' enhance the rhythm of the poem. Dickinson's punctuation is foregrounded: at first sight it seems to

violate the rhythm of the poem as the first dash closes the first stanza while the second one suggests an emphatic pause before the final element in the first line of the second stanza. Yet even this deviant pattern seems not to diminish the effect of the otherwise clear repetitive structure with its implied semantic ('Deity' and 'Divinity') and phonetic (dominance of [l] and [n]) repetitions.

We believe that parallelism in poetry is 'meaningful, while it gives pleasure. The "pleasure principle" lies at the heart of much poetic experience. When reading a poem (...) we are delighted when something "returns", something that was there a few seconds before' (van Peer and Chesnokova, forthcoming). Thus, the reported experiment aimed at checking EFL learners' awareness of the repetitive patterns in Dickinson's poem and verifying whether these structures produce an emotional effect on the readers.

To this end, students were asked to read the poem silently and anonymously fill in the specially designed questionnaires in line with the tenets of using empirical research methods in the Humanities (Chesnokova 2011; van Peer, Hakemulder and Zyngier 2012). The respondents were encouraged to contribute five adjectives they would associate with the reading. After that, the students indicated whether the verse evoked any emotions in them, justifying their answer in an open way. Finally, they were asked to underline what they considered to be the most striking elements in the text and to number them from the most to the least striking.

The context of the study (Fowler 1981: 2) was taken into account as it assisted in building logical and reasonable interpretation when the readers first 'felt' the text and after that accounted for their impressions from a language perspective. In the reported case, the context included the setting (a conventional university room), the experiment duration (about twenty minutes) and comprehension intensity (close reading).

The results of this Empirical Stylistics experiment supported the idea that repetitive structures in the poem indeed influenced EFL learners' perceptions. From the educational perspective, both the teacher and the students later acknowledged that the evidence-based way of dealing with stylistic issues largely contributed to acquisition of patterns by EFL students and stimulated them to further enhance their language skills. In what follows, we will supply some data that reinforce the argument.

Thus, ninety-two percent of the experiment participants indicated that the poem indeed evoked emotions in them. But were these emotions positive or negative ones? We have empirical evidence to support the answer. The adjectives that the respondents contributed to describe their reactions were (listed in the ascending order from the least to the most often mentioned) the following: 'thought-provoking', 'sad', 'lofty', 'interesting', 'happy', 'eternal', 'cheerful', 'romantic', 'lovely', 'inspiring' and 'optimistic'. Remarkably, just one adjective out of eleven on the list ('sad') is negatively coloured, which demonstrates that the EFL readers evaluated the poem in a generally positive way.

In selecting the most striking elements in the text, the respondents focused both on individual words ('love', 'deity', 'vitality', 'immortality' or 'to die') and on textual patterns. Among the latter, 54

% of the readers underlined ‘Unable are the Loved to die / Unable they that Love – to die’; 46 % opted for ‘Love is Immortality’ while ‘Nay, it is Deity’ appeared to be the choice of 15 % of respondents. The reported results reveal how EFL learners are sensitive to both form and the meaning of literary texts. Additionally, in their answers to the open question about justifying their reaction to the poem, students mentioned (the comments are quoted *ipsis litteris*) that ‘the rhythm and stress can change our comprehension of poetry’, that ‘” for” is tricky, that’s why some phrases cross’ and that ‘the text is parallel’ – an obvious demonstration of their sensitivity to foregrounded elements in Dickinson’s poem.

Hence, the experiment is an example of how Empirical Stylistics can be applied in an EFL context where learners, without having an innate natural feeling for the language, are nevertheless able to increase their sensitivity to the verbal artistry of an author.

At the same time, this approach unpacks problems to be addressed. On the one hand, EFL learners have natural troubles acquiring not only stylistic skills, but also, and prior to that, language awareness. On the other hand, they are sometimes more motivated to do so than native-speaking students as they are aware of the advantages that learning Stylistics brings: from getting grades to later being a more qualified applicant in the job market.

That said, the clear benefit of applying Stylistics in EFL learning is the two-faceted aim of the course. On the one hand, it serves as an important element of professional training, contributing to the development of students’ language competence. On the other hand, when insight and precision become the main instruments, it trains the skill of critical appreciation of authentic literary texts, which, especially if familiar from prior reading experience, provide EFL learners with the cultural background, thus sensitizing them to the implications and hidden intentions of the author as students shift their priority from entertainment to educational reading.

ELT THROUGH TRANSLATION

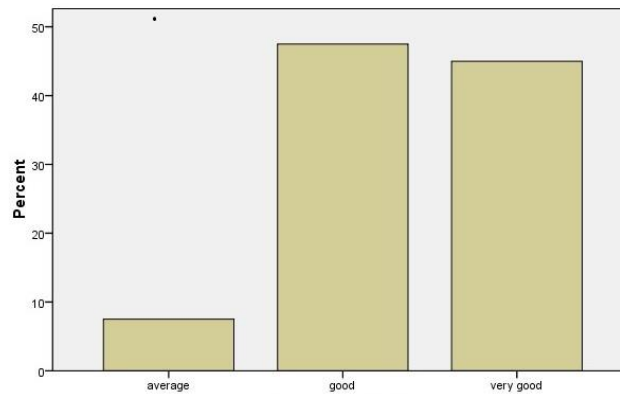
In Ukrainian academic context, ELT is formally conducted in two major programs: General Philology and Translation. In this section we will focus on evidence-based outcomes of the latter and report the results of the experiment (Chesnokova 2012) in which we checked whether the English language competence acquired through Translation program is sufficient for its envisaged outcome – confident work in the market².

The experiment involved two groups of participants. Group 1 consisted of 41 EFL students majoring in Translation (7.3 % male and 92.7 % female, all younger than 30). Group 2 included 34 professionals with the experience of 1 to almost 50 years in the profession, from translation of standard documents to governmental level conference interpretation (44.1 % male and 55.9 % female; 94.1 % younger than 40).

² The author is thankful to Dr. Vander Viana for assistance in designing the experiment and preparing the tools.

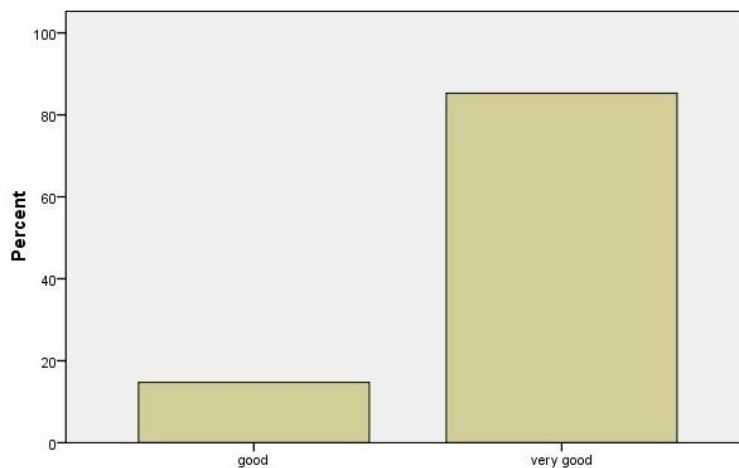
As an initial step aiming at getting a better picture of the samples, *self*-evaluation of their EFL skills was conducted. The scale applied included the following options: ‘very bad’, ‘bad’, ‘average’, ‘good’ and ‘very good’. Quite predictably, the self-perceived language level of EFL learners appeared to be considerably lower than that of professionals. Thus, 8 % of students assessed their reading command in English as ‘average’, 47 %, as ‘good’, and only 45 %, as ‘very good’ (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. EFL reading skills. Self-evaluation. Group 1 (students)



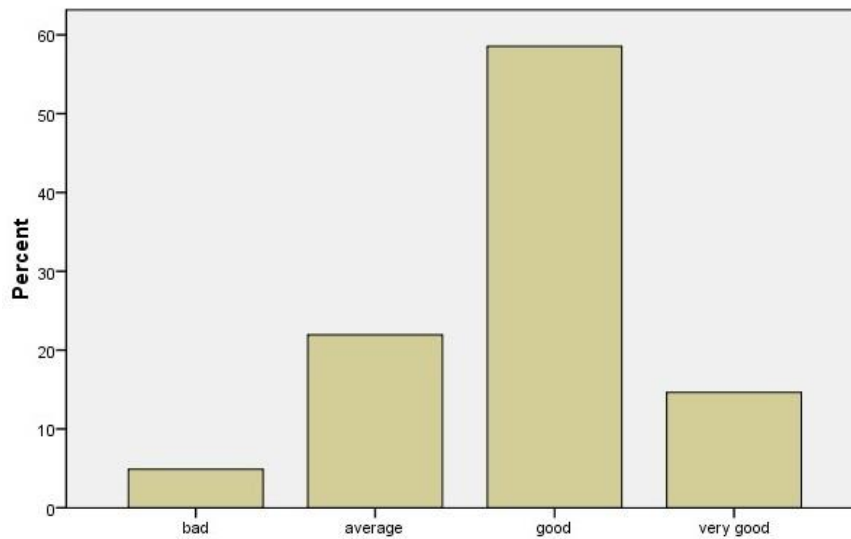
In the group of professionals, the following proportion was identified: 17 % indicated the ‘good’ level, and 83 %, ‘very good’ (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. EFL reading skills. Self-evaluation. Group 2 (professionals)



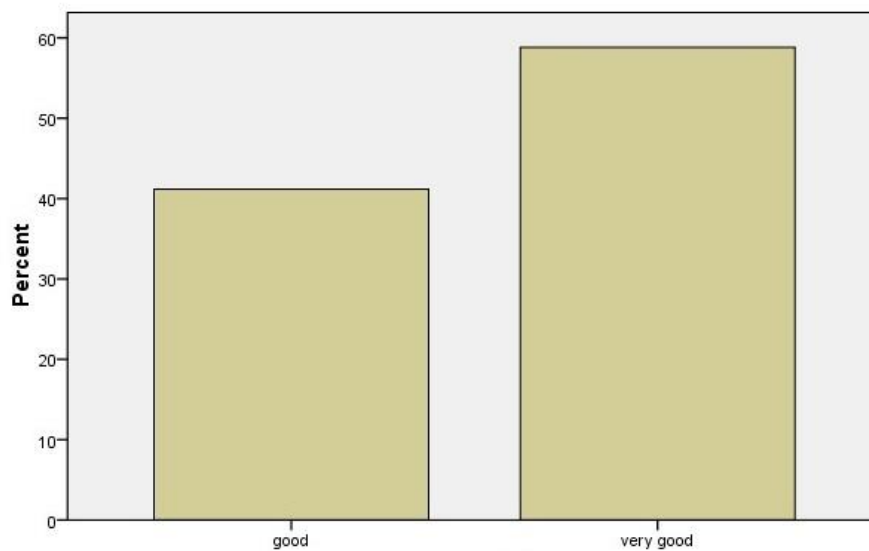
The *self*-assessment level of participants’ writing skills in English appeared to be the following. In Group 1, 5 % of respondents indicated it as ‘bad’, 22 %, as ‘average’, 58 %, as ‘good’, and only 15 % as ‘very good’ (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. EFL writing skills. Self-evaluation. Group 1 (students)



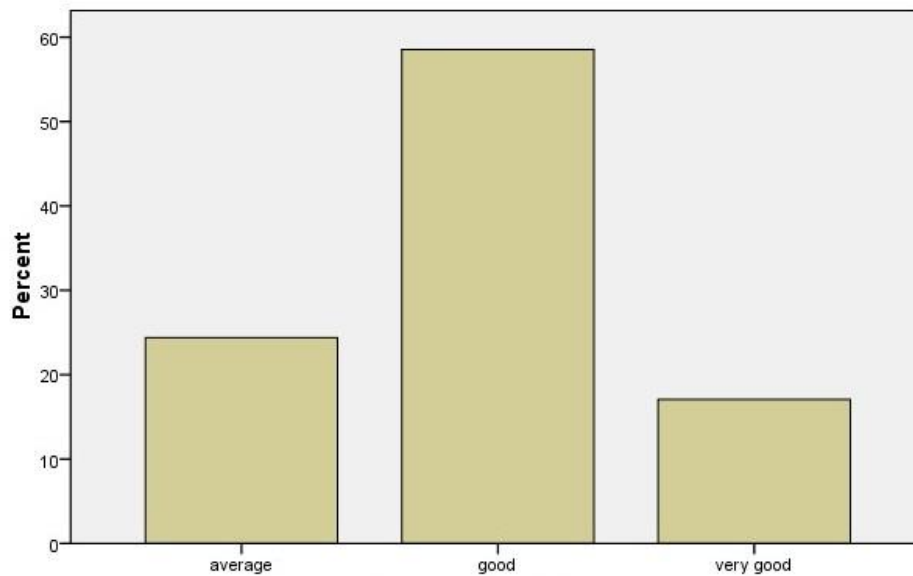
In the group of professionals, 42 % indicated the corresponding skills as ‘good’, and 58 %, as ‘very good’ (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. EFL writing skills. Self-evaluation. Group 2 (professionals)



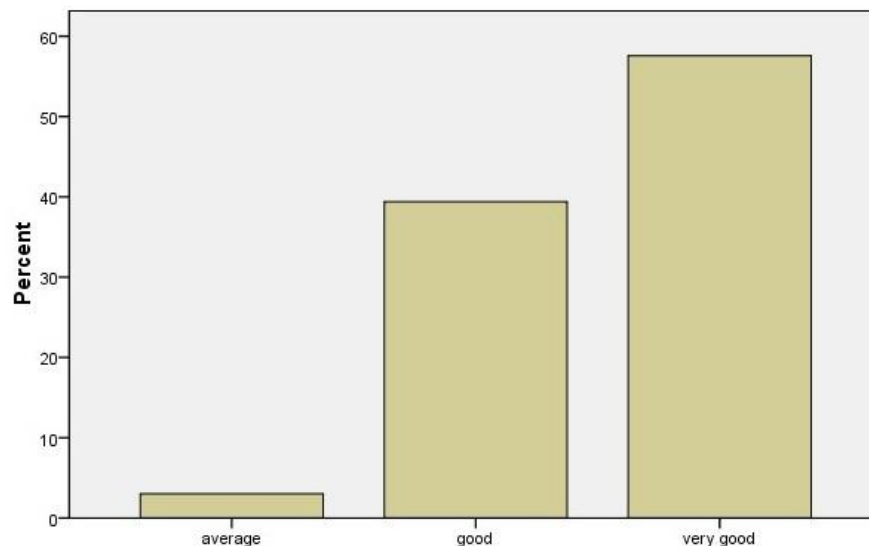
Similarly, the *self*-assessment data of the two groups regarding their listening skills appeared to be different. Thus 25 % of participating students believe that it is ‘average’, 58 %, ‘good’, and 17 %, ‘very good’ (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. EFL listening skills. Self-evaluation. Group 1 (students)



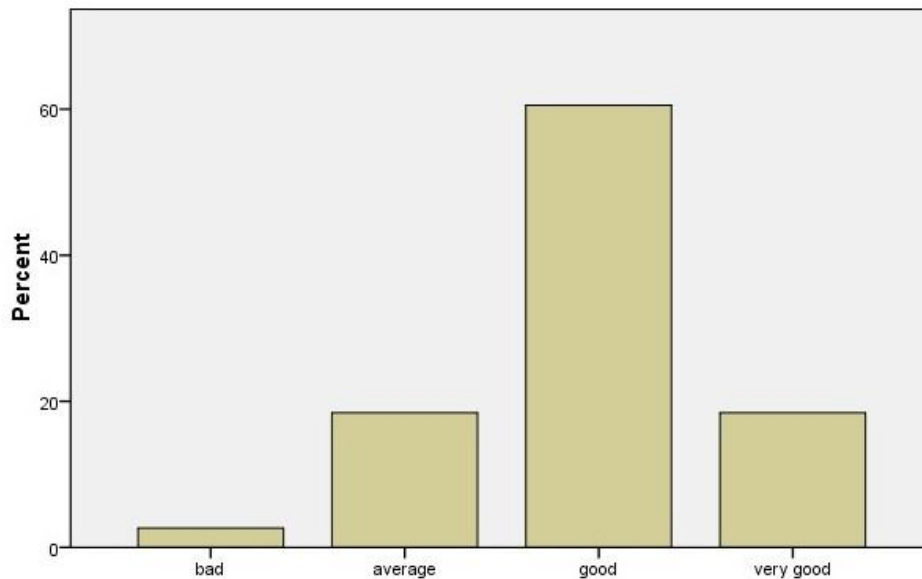
The self-assessment of listening skills of professional translators appeared to be the following (see Figure 6): 3 % marked is at ‘average’ (we may assume that these were answers by written translators), 40 %, as ‘good’, and 57 %, as ‘very good’.

Figure 6. EFL listening skills. Self-evaluation. Group 2 (professionals)



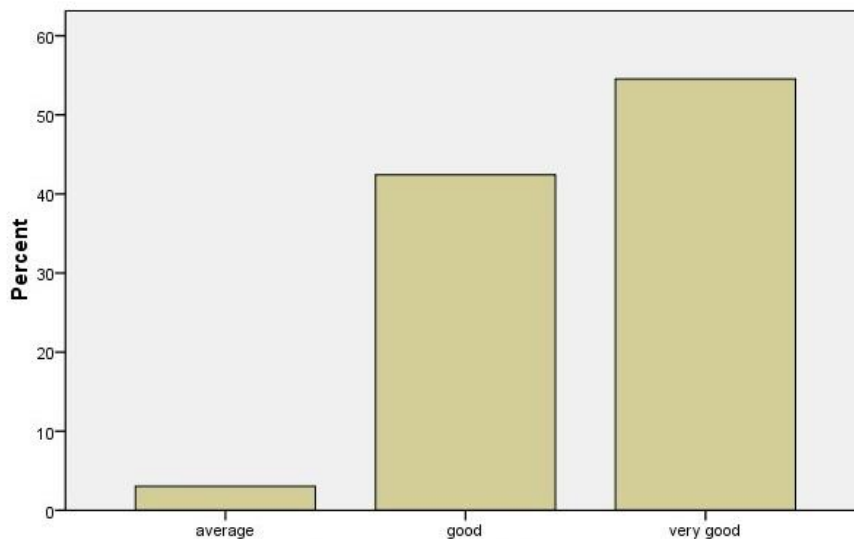
Finally, speaking skills of the participants of the two groups were also self-assessed rather differently. 3 % of students believe that they can speak English ‘bad[ly]’; 20 % do it on an ‘average’ level; 60 %, on a ‘good’ level, and only 17 % admit that their EFL speaking skills are ‘very good’ (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. EFL speaking skills. Self-evaluation. Group 1 (students)



In the group of professionals, the distribution of answers is the following (see Figure 8): 3 % assessed their level of speaking English as ‘average’ (possibly being written translators), 42 %, as ‘good’, and 55 %, as ‘very good’.

Figure 8. EFL speaking skills. Self-evaluation. Group 2 (professionals)



In the next stage of the experiment, the learning strategies applied in the university courses were assessed by the respondents. For this reason, they were asked about the resources they were encouraged to use to complement designated EFL manuals. The following options were offered: ‘bilingual dictionaries’, ‘monolingual dictionaries’, ‘corpora’, ‘grammar books’, ‘Internet’, and ‘others’.

In comparison of data between Group 1 and Group 2, two variables ('Internet' and 'monolingual dictionaries') yielded statistically significant results. The Internet was a learning tool for 83 % of EFL students and for just 60 % of professionals, which can be explained by the time gap between their education. Alternatively, the latter used monolingual dictionaries more often (78 % of respondents in Group 2 against just 55 % of participants in Group 1).

In the final stage of the experiment, we decided to check whether EFL learners and professionals are content with their formal education. To this end, the respondents gave us their reactions to the following claim: 'I would like to have more retraining possibilities after graduation'. The answers were given on a five-point Likert scale with the following options: 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'undecided', 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. The variable showed the tendency to statistical significance: 7 % of respondents in Group 1 opted for 'disagree' (see Figure 9) while in Group 2 'agree' and 'strongly agree' were predominantly chosen (see Figure 10).

Figure. 9. Responses in the variable 'I would like to have more retraining possibilities after graduation'. Group 1 (EFL students)

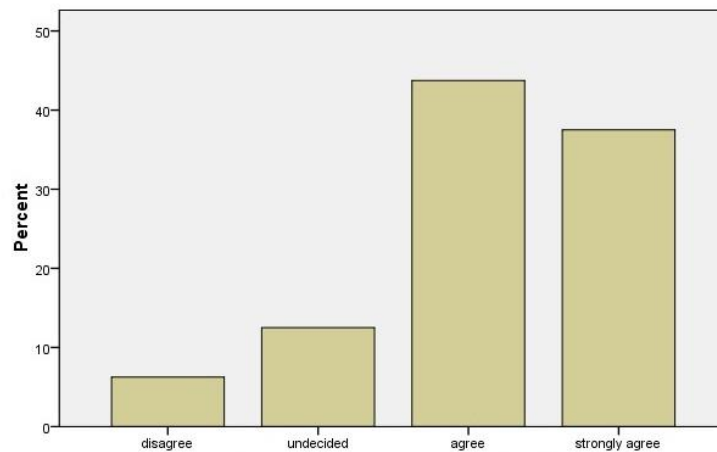
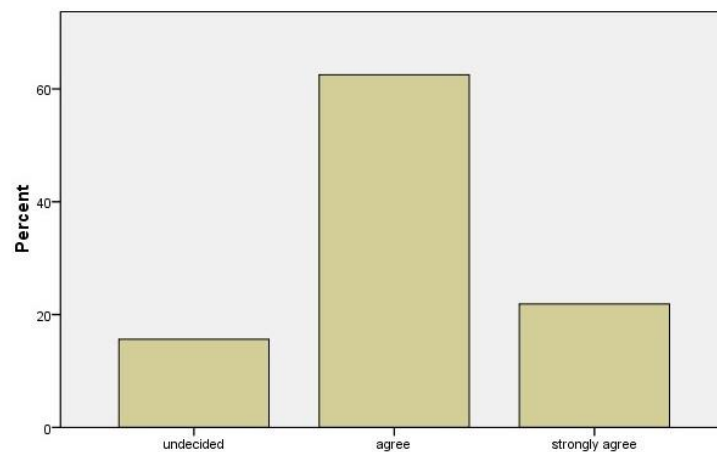


Figure 10. Responses in the variable 'I would like to have more retraining possibilities after graduation'. Group 2 (professionals)



The results seem to indicate insufficiency of formal education for successful work in the market – the evaluation which increases with getting professional experience. Yet this hypothesis needs longitudinal research to support or refute the assumption.

To sum up, the collected data are not enough to claim that programs in Translation are less suited than those in Philology to develop language competence of EFL learners, but the reported results may serve a warning light for educators to consider possible benefits and limitations of competing or complementing curricula.

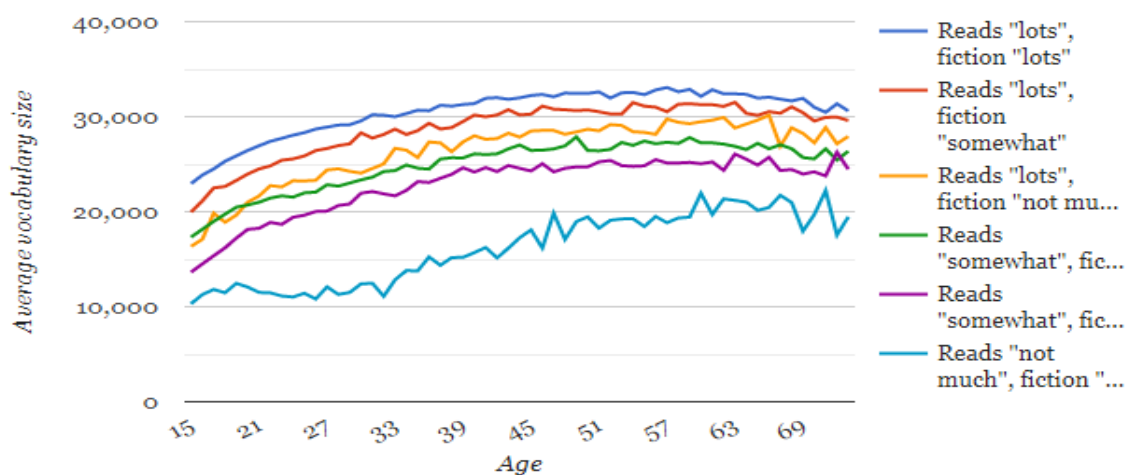
ELT IN REMOTE EDUCATION TIMES: READING HELPS

In early 2020s the world faced an unexpected challenge that made educators throughout the world not only develop technologically-bound solutions, but also adapt their curricula and general approaches to minimise the negative affect of distance learning on the expected outcomes. The rapidly changing international situation inevitably brings modifications to traditional ELT, which has already been challenged by hi-tech innovations. Educators should be aware of the fact that younger EFL learners are more immersed in online international community. They have more opportunities to practice their English outside the classroom, and often prefer to do so – formally or informally. With the spread of social networks and video-communication tools, even rural dwellers can attend online language schools, find a personal tutor, or go for a suitable MOOC option. Since COVID-induced restrictions have brought additional challenges to the *coronaverse* we live in, ELT found itself still more dependent not only on the use of technology, but even more so on the adaptability of educators to the altered context.

Now that in *quarantimes* caused by *coronapocalypse* learners have mostly turned into *studytubers*, *coronasplaining* on the part of an ELT educator is additionally challenged, both technologically and emotionally. Many of them rightfully complain about turning into *zombies*, when hours are spent in various videoconference platforms, and consequently feel mental weariness, zoom fatigue or even physical exhaustion. Nevertheless, the need to compensate for the educational losses stays, and considerable organisational and temporal flexibility is what educators may benefit from.

A solution can be offered to this situation, and this solution has clear evidence-based support. The solution is extensive reading. In an earlier section of this article we demonstrated how confronting literary texts and teaching Stylistics can complement ELT. Apart from that, addressing literature outside allocated classes will bring extra rewards. Quite obviously reading in ELT has a benefit of expanding the learners' vocabulary, but the effect is much more long-lasting than one may guess. It is reading *literature* that especially augments one's inventory of words – reading non-fiction contributes considerably less to vocabulary enhancement (Reading Habits 2013). The findings are demonstrated in Figure 11 below, and they do not depend on the respondents' intelligence, nor on their educational level. The data are collected from native speakers of English, but we believe that those of EFL will be not less impressive.

Figure 11. Average English native speaker vocabulary by age and reading habits (*ibid.*)



As can be seen from the graph, 15-year-old teenagers who read a lot have a vocabulary that is 2.5 larger than that of their non-reading peers, and the difference becomes even more impressive in their student years (21 – 27 in the horizontal axis on the graph), approximating a three-fold one. As readers / non-readers get older, the gap closes somewhat, but even in the old age it is still more than 10,000 words (which is about one-third of an adult's vocabulary). So, in the daily habits that were challenged by the remote education, reading is what EFL learners can focus on as the direct consequence of this is not just your academic performance. Much more than that, students' vocabulary size means an easier access to the world and the information about it, a greater ability to understand texts as world descriptors as well as more fluency in expressing one's own ideas and feelings – the skill you can hardly underestimate.

(IN LIEU OF) CONCLUSION

With the above said in mind, we can conclude that the longitudinal importance of EFL in various educational contexts is obvious in its stability. The case study of Ukraine is just one sample that demonstrates how traditions and the 21st millennium challenges meet and complement each other. We may hypothesise that the situation is not dramatically different across the world though the claim needs further research and empirical validation.

Thus, we encourage colleagues in diverse cultural settings to refrain from intuitive claims in favour of evidence-based conclusions on how educational practices work, what challenges are confronted and solution offered. Once empirical data are collected and analysed, we dramatically increase our understanding of the issues – to the benefit of our students.

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