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Asynchronous And Synchronous Distance Learning Of English As A Foreign Language

ABSTRACT

The paper deals with using Edmodo (an educational social network) and Google Meet as distance learning tool and platform in teaching English within university English courses during the first and second waves of COVID-19 in Slovakia. It draws the basic difference between online learning and distance learning, as well as between asynchronous and synchronous distance learning. It briefly introduces Edmodo's and Google Meet's main features that can be utilised in the process of distance learning of university students. It presents the results of the research that was conducted with the students of Faculty of Mass Media Communication of UCM in Trnava, who participated in English courses conducted by the means of asynchronous and synchronous distance learning during the summer term of the academic year 2019/20 and the winter term of 2020/21, i. e. during both waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Via the quantitative method of a questionnaire survey, the research participants provided feedback on both asynchronous distance learning (with Edmodo) and synchronous distance learning (combining Google Meet with Edmodo). The findings present students' perception of the educational platform and the videoconferencing tool pointing to their benefits, weaknesses and overall effectiveness as communication platforms within both forms of distance learning, asynchronous and synchronous. The paper draws comparison of the two methods and assumes conclusions regarding their effectiveness in distance learning of English.

KEY WORDS

Asynchronous distance learning. COVID-19. Distance learning. Edmodo. English. Google Meet. Students. Synchronous distance learning. Teachers.

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the beginning of distance learning can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century,¹ and thus it not solely a phenomenon of today, never before had it gained as much worldwide attention and importance as in 2020 due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent safety measures taken by individual national governments. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistic Data, in an attempt to minimise the spread of the new corona virus, as many as 84,5 % of schools closed worldwide, including all types of educational institutions providing education in all levels, from 0 to 8, according to ISCED, in the peak of the first wave of the pandemic. The closure affected almost 1.5 billion learners worldwide. In Slovakia, the number reaches almost 1 million, with 92 454 affected learners being the students of tertiary levels of education.² Even though the worldwide impact on education during the pandemic's second wave in the autumn of the same year was not as critical as in spring, affecting about 250 million learners worldwide in November,³ in the conditions of Slovak tertiary education the situation was almost the same with the closures of the majority of universities. The transition to distance learning in the first wave of COVID-19 placed all participants of the educational process in a brand-new situation and urged them to quickly adapt and utilise communication tools to allow for distance learning, or at least, to ensure the flow of educational instruction towards learners in order to keep up with their curricula. In case of universities and their students, as they were the subject of the research presented in this paper, the transition encountered several difficulties. According to a survey carried out by Student Council for Higher Education in Slovakia reflecting on university students' perception of distance learning during the first wave of the pandemic, there were more satisfied students than the unsatisfied ones. However, it also showed that switching to distance learning was inconsistent, various tools of online teaching were used, there were big differences in the quality of tuition between individual subjects and quality transition and good information flow were to be accredited rather to individual teachers than to institutional support and the use of uniform teaching/learning and communication instruments.⁴ The findings are not surprising as no educational organisation anticipated this type of transition of face-to face learning to distance learning on a such a big scale. However, it can be assumed that the switch from face-to-face learning to distance learning in the autumn was smoother, as all participants of education had already become familiar with communication tools used in distance learning and had created certain routines for this type of education which could and should be further perfected and fine-tuned. In case of the research presented in the paper, the refinement process was represented by switching from asynchronous distance learning relying only on the educational social networking platform of Edmodo to synchronous distance learning embracing also the videoconferencing tool of Google Meet. The presented research results reflect on the effectiveness of both distance learning methods utilising the above-mentioned communication tools in the process of teaching English as a foreign language to tertiary students.

Distance learning should not and cannot consist only of lecturing or practising formally prescribed subject matter via digital communication tools. Grombly and Anderson claim that current instruction methods focus on instruction for approaching scholarly sources for academic use and neglect guidance for media consumption in everyday life. Thus, even though students may achieve academic information literacy, they still fail to apply these same standards to

¹ DELA CRUZ, J.: *History of Distance Education*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/17360954/History_of_Distance_Education>.

² *COVID – 19 Impact on Education*. [online]. [2020-11-20]. Available at: <<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>>.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ *Dopad COVID-19 na študentov*. [online]. [2020-10-30]. Available at: <<https://saavs.sk/dopad-covid-19-na-studentov-hlavne-zistenia-a-zavery/>>.

their own information and social media consumption.⁵ Therefore, it should be borne in mind, especially during lockdowns resulting into social isolation and largely relying only on media-communicated information, that distance learning needs to address also this learners' need by appropriate choice of distance learning forms and methods. Teaching foreign languages provides a variety of means and space to reflect the need also within distance learning.

2. Distance Learning

The notion of distance learning has shifted significantly since its very beginnings. It started as learning by correspondence, however, developments in the communication technology have allowed for new ways of implementing distance learning, which has led to the rise of terms such as distributed learning, open learning, flexible learning, web-based learning, virtual learning, online learning or e-learning.⁶ Even though both distance learning and online learning rely on learning in the online environment, the terms are not to be interchanged. Stauffer identifies three major differences between them: location, interaction and intention. In distance learning, students study at home (mostly online) and teachers assign and check work digitally, in-person interaction between them is absent (the communication takes place via a variety of communication tools) and at present it is designed as a method for delivering instruction only online. On the other hand, in online learning, or e-learning, students and their teacher can be together in the classroom and work on their tasks and assignments digitally, both the educator and the ones being educated interact together in-person on a regular basis. Other teaching methods are used in combination with the aforementioned one which only serves as a supplemental activity extending learning opportunities for students.⁷ Stauffer's distinction is clearly drawn also in the definitions of the phenomena provided by online Oxford Learner's Dictionary which defines e-learning as „a system of learning that uses electronic media, typically over the internet“⁸ and distance learning as „a system of education in which people study at home with the help of special internet sites and send or email work to their teachers.“⁹ Thus, it can be concluded that what most education participants experienced in the spring and autumn of 2020 was the transition of face-to-face learning to distance learning, which, to a great extent, relied on the methods of online learning. Based on a research conducted by HubinÁková and Mikula, before the worldwide switch to distance learning caused by the coronavirus pandemic, students of media studies did not find Internet based education attractive and they did not agree it was a better, more modern and more engaging learning. The interest of surveyed students in this form of education was very little.¹⁰ Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that for all participants of education at all levels this transition was a huge challenge. However, it can be assumed that the transition of learning into virtual world was smoother and easier during the second wave of the pandemic, as both learners and instructors had already embraced the features of online learning during the spring school closures. From this point of view, being familiar with certain educational platforms and tools allows its users for a more convenient

⁵ GROMBLY, A., ANDERSON, A.: Information and Media Literacy: Integrating Literacies into Library Instruction. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 6-7.

⁶ DAROJAT, O.: *Reviewing the Basic Themes in Distance Education*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/8145537/Reviewing_the_basic_concepts_in_distance_education>.

⁷ STAUFFER, B.: *What's the Difference Between Online Learning and Distance Learning?* [online]. [2020-11-9]. Available at: <<https://www.aeseducation.com/blog/online-learning-vs-distance-learning>>.

⁸ *E-learning*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/e-learning?q=e-learning>>.

⁹ *Distance learning*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/distance-learning?q=distance+learning>>.

¹⁰ HUBINÁKOVÁ, H., MIKULA, M.: The Importance of the Internet the Life of Students of Media Studies. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 35 - 36.

adapting to distance learning. For example, in response to the worldwide disruption to education due to COVID-19, the educational platform of Edmodo was among the recommended distance learning tools by both UNESCO¹¹ and the European Commission.¹²

2.1 Synchronous and Asynchronous Distance Learning

Having drawn the major distinction between distance learning and online learning, it is also important to point to the differences between asynchronous and synchronous distance learning.

The major distinction between the two forms of distance learning lies in the time at which learning takes place. This factor determines the choice of used methods, communication tools, the form of study material and the intensity of interaction between education participants. It also underlies the benefits and weaknesses of each form of distance learning, which may be different for individual learners, depending on what type of learner they are and when they are able to participate in distance learning.

Synchronous learning happens in real time. This means that the participants in this form of learning interact in a specific virtual environment at a set time. Frequent methods of synchronous distance learning include video conferencing, teleconferencing, live chatting, and live-streamed lectures that have to be viewed in real time. Its main advantages are classroom engagement, dynamic learning and instructional depth.¹³ It is particularly beneficial for those learners who welcome active discussion, immediate feedback, and personal interactions with peers and instructors in the process of their learning. While it can offer much of the engagement available in a classroom, its participants can also benefit from studying in the comfort of their homes and no commute time. For fast learners, this form of learning can be an improvement over classroom learning as it allows for a more dynamic exploration of concepts, topics and ideas. Participants in synchronous distance learning interact regularly and frequently with their teachers and these interactions provide regular opportunities for face-to-face discussions, accessible, in depth instruction, individual guidance, support and mentorship. The disadvantages of this format of distance learning arise from possible unpredictable work schedule of the learners and technical difficulties like unstable internet connection, crashing hard drives, dying batteries or even the lack of technological equipment to conduct this form of distance learning.

Asynchronous learning does not happen in real time, it happens on students' schedules. While study material in various forms (texts, videos, assignments for completion, recordings) are provided by the teacher or instructor, students themselves access this material and satisfy course requirements on their own schedule, as long as they meet given deadlines. Frequent methods of asynchronous distance learning include self-guided lesson modules, lecture notes, virtual libraries, pre-recorded video or audio content, links to internet sources, and online discussion boards. Students work through the study material themselves, and only occasionally interact with instructors through social media or email. The main advantages of this form of learning are expressed by flexibility, pacing and affordability.¹⁴ Learners access freely available materials and complete them at their convenience. They set their own pace when working with the material, however, within set deadlines, and complete them based on their understanding of given concepts and topics. This may suit both quick learners as well as the ones who take longer time to absorb new knowledge. Compared to synchronous distance learning programmes, the asynchronous ones are often priced lower as they do not require

¹¹ Edmodo, *Subsidiary of NetDragon, Recommended by UNESCO for Distance learning*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/03/19/2003088/0/en/Edmodo-Subsidiary-of-NetDragon-Recommended-by-UNESCO-for-Distance-Learning.html>>.

¹² *How VET stakeholders are facing the COVID-19 emergency*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/vocational-skills-week/sites/evsw/files/list_of_tools_v5.pdf>.

¹³ *Synchronous Learning vs. Asynchronous Learning in Online Education*. [online]. [2021-02-26]. Available at: <<https://thebestschools.org/magazine/synchronous-vs-asynchronous-education/>>.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

instructors' or administrators' regular daily attention, which may be a factor to be considered for students financing their distance learning on their own. The disadvantages of asynchronous distance learning stem from the lack of personal interaction and opportunities to discuss and network with peers. Moreover, it may be really challenging for learners to remain motivated to learn about relevant topics and concepts without the constant feedback and support from an instructor.

3. Edmodo and Google Meet

There are various communication platforms and videoconferencing tools that may be utilised in the process of distance learning, both asynchronous and synchronous. Their choice depends on several factors, including teachers'/students' preferences, technical requirements and availability of technological equipment or a decision of the educational institution to use a unified communication tool within all lessons conducted by distance learning. Therefore, it is not the aim of the paper to provide a detailed account of such tools and platforms. However, as research results presented later in this paper focus on the effectiveness of asynchronous and synchronous distance learning of English as a foreign language and the perception of such learning by tertiary students, this part focuses on a brief description of the educational platform of Edmodo¹⁵ and the videoconferencing tool of Google Meet used in the process.

Approaching a whole variety of media texts that are to be found in the virtual space requires, according to Gennaro and Miller, an interpretation of literacy that sees any and all texts as symbols which get encoded by writers and decoded by readers. The question is, how conscious are we of the processes of encoding and decoding that are happening around us, and how active are we in the translation?¹⁶ Social networking sites, particularly the educational ones, might serve as platforms enabling educators address these texts in a (virtual) classroom and attempt such conscious and supervised translation.

Edmodo is a free social networking service designed specifically for the purposes of education. It was founded in 2008 in San Mateo, California, USA with the intention to bridge the gap between how students live their lives and how they learn in school. It was created to bring education into a 21st century environment.¹⁷ In February 2020 it had over 100 million users, 400 000 of them being teachers.¹⁸ It is available in 18 language mutations, however, neither Slovak or Czech versions are provided.¹⁹ Being a social network in its core, the platform ensures the users' safety by creating a closed environment that is free from spammers and internet predators.²⁰ The learning management platform is set up like a social networking feed, similar to Facebook, into which announcements, questions, tests, assignments and other study material, such as videos, podcasts, presentations, links to external websites can be posted by teachers for students to work with, who can like these post and comment them, or even post their own contents.²¹

¹⁵ For a more detailed description of the platform and its features, see the author's previous paper on Edmodo: RIGO, F.: Edmodo as a Communication Tool in Teaching English. In SOLÍK, M., RYBANSKÝ, R. (eds.): *Megatrends and Media: Reality and Media Bubbles: Conference Proceedings from the International Scientific Conference*. Trnava : Faculty of Mass Media Communication of UCM in Trnava, 2018, p. 273-281.

¹⁶ GENNARO, S., MILLER, B.: Critical Media Literacy in the Googleburg Galaxy. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 19.

¹⁷ GARNER, G.: *Edmodo – A Platform Redefining Learning*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <<http://www.gettingsmart.com/2015/06/edmodo-a-platform-redefining-learning/>>.

¹⁸ SMITH, C.: *10 Edmodo Fact and Statistics (2020)/By the Numbers*. [online]. [2020-11-5]. Available at: <<https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/edmodo-facts-statistics/>>.

¹⁹ Still, the absence of the mother tongue version of the platform did not represent a problem for the students participating in the research, as its scope was using Edmodo in distance learning withing an English language course.

²⁰ WANKEL, C.: *Educating Educators with Social Media*. Bingley : Emerald, 2011, p. 26.

²¹ PARDO-BUNTE, M.: *Edmodo Review*. [online]. [2021-03-01]. Available at: <<https://www.betterbuys.com/lms/reviews/edmodo/>>.

Among other benefits, the ones used most frequently with distance learning dealt with in this paper were unlimited storage, integration with Microsoft Office, access via a mobile application allowing for Edmodo's use anytime and anywhere. Being a fully functional social network, Edmodo provides its users with the feature of instant messaging, which is, however, limited only to the exchange of messages between the teacher and their students. Edmodo notifies its users, both teachers and students, about each relevant activity that takes place within a study group. A notification can be sent either as an e-mail notification, a mobile application notification or a text message. This way, the platform keeps education participants updated, while also allowing them to review past activities.²² Once its users become familiar with the features they find most relevant, Edmodo can serve not only as an effective online learning tool simplifying the management of regular face-to-face lessons and courses, it can also effectively complement and/or accommodate distance learning, as the later stated results prove.

The unprecedented switch to working from home and distance education triggered by the coronavirus lockdowns has led to the boom of videoconferencing tools, **Google Meet** being one of the major players. The virtual meeting solution reported 100 million daily users in April 2020 and was adding about 3 million new users each day.²³ Its main features include two-way and multi-way audio and video calls with a resolution of up to 720p, an accompanying chat, noise cancellation audio filter, screen sharing to present documents, presentations, spreadsheets or other browser tabs, ability to join meetings through a web browser or through Android or iOS applications, and hosts being able to monitor, deny entry and remove users during a call. Google Meet requires people to be logged in with a Google account to join or start a call and provides excellent cross-platform compatibility, and seamless integration with apps from Microsoft Office and Google. It offers high level of security due to its superior level of encryption.²⁴ Depending on the edition that is used (a free edition or the premium ones) it provides the opportunity of a video meeting for 100 – 250 participants at one time with the unlimited number of meetings. The duration of an individual group meeting is limited to up to 1 hour with the free edition²⁵ and to as many as 24 hours with the paid editions. Since April 2020, on a monthly basis, Google Meet's software writers have been regularly adding new features and enhancements to the tool, such as tiled layout for larger calls, filtering out noises in video meetings, blocking anonymous users from education meetings, casting Google Meet to television, using a whiteboard, providing attendance reports for education users, hand rising, or muting all participant for education accounts.²⁶ The constant improvements to the videoconferencing tool reflect the intention to make it as effective virtual meeting solution as possible, not only for business purposes, but also to accommodate distance learning participants' needs for a convenient and reliable virtual learning environment.

4. Research Design and Methodology

The research, whose results are presented in this paper, focused on students' perceptions of distance learning carried out synchronously and asynchronously using relevant digital tools and platforms.

²² *What Information Do Notifications Show?* [online]. [2018-04-21]. Available at: <<https://support.edmodo.com/hc/en-us/articles/205005104-What-Information-Do-Notifications-Show->>.

²³ LERMAN, R.: *Big Tech is coming for Zoom: Google makes video chatting service Meet free.* [online]. [2021-03-01]. Available at: <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/29/google-meet-zoom-competitor/>>.

²⁴ MARTIN, D.: *Google Meet vs. Zoom.* [online]. [2021-03-01]. Available at: <<https://www.digitaltrends.com/computing/google-meet-vs-zoom/>>.

²⁵ Note: however, until the end of March 2021, the individual group meetings could last up to 24 hours also with the free version: *Choose a plan that works for you.* [online]. [2021-03-01]. Available at: <<https://apps.google.com/intl/en-GB/meet/pricing/>>.

²⁶ *What's new in Google Meet.* [online]. [2021-03-02]. Available at: <https://support.google.com/meet/answer/9545619?hl=en&ref_topic=7306097#zippy=>.

4.1 Asynchronous Distance Learning

The asynchronous method was applied in distance learning during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ In this form of distance learning, Edmodo was used as a communication tool via which instruction was delivered and regular testing of students' progress was carried out. The instruction was delivered to students via Edmodo posts in the form of a Word document on a weekly basis. It covered the subject-matter prescribed by individual syllabi for each study group. The students were supposed to work with the delivered study material on their own and were encouraged to consult any ambiguities or individual queries by contacting the teacher via the Edmodo messaging feature and share their language production in the comment section below the respective posts. Within two to three days, each study group was assigned a test covering the subject-matter included in the previous instruction post. Tests had been created using Edmodo assessment tools with a set time limit and a specified deadline. Each lesson instruction was ensued by its respective test. The quantitative research data was obtained by the method of a *questionnaire survey* which was used to get feedback from the research sample on distance learning carried out via the above-mentioned educational platform and following the above-specified teaching/learning procedure. It is important to add that Edmodo had been used as a communication channel within English course already before school closures and the switch to distance learning, i. e. during the winter term of the academic year 2019/20, thus the participants of the research could easily adapt it when the tuition moved to online environment.

4.2 Synchronous Distance Learning

The synchronous distance learning method was applied in distance learning during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸ In this form of distance learning, the tuition was carried out via the videoconferencing tool of Google Meet allowing for real time communication between the teacher and the students, as well as for communication between students themselves. As teaching a foreign language within the communicative approach should not be carried out solely by the means of lecturing, the participants of learning were encouraged to interact and produce language in real time, either via speaking on their microphones or using Google Meet's comment section. A variety of visual or auidial inputs, such as relevant pages from the course's literature, MS Word or Excel documents, external websites, videos, etc. were made available to students via the videoconferencing tool's presentation features. However, on top of using Google Meet, Edmodo remained the communication channel via which relevant study material (comprising mostly of notes from real time online lessons, homework assignments, external links to online grammar exercises, as well as links to media contents students were supposed to work with) was shared and regular testing of students' progress was carried out in real time, during individual online lessons. The quantitative research data was obtained by the method of a *questionnaire survey* which was used to obtain feedback from the research sample on synchronous distance learning carried out via the videoconferencing tool of Google Meet in combination with Edmodo which served both as testing tool and a platform where all relevant study material was to be found. It is important to add that, similarly to asynchronous

²⁷ Note: The tuition started in the week of 11th February 2019 as regular face-to-face learning and after four weeks it switched to distance learning starting in the week of 9th March 2020, i. e. the tuition comprised of four weeks of face-to-face learning and 9 weeks of distance learning.

²⁸ Note: The tuition for the students in the 1st year of study started in the week of 23th September 2020 as regular face-to-face learning and after two weeks it switched to distance learning starting in the week of 5th October 2020, when the winter academic term started also for the students in the other years of study, i. e. all the tuition relevant for our research into distance learning during the second wave of COVID-19 was carried out online and synchronously since 5th October 2020.

distance learning within the first wave of the pandemic, the vast majority of the respondents had become familiar with Edmodo prior to the commencement of synchronous distance learning.

4.3 Research Sample

The research sample of the part of the research that focused on **asynchronous distance learning** (during the first wave of COVID-19) consisted of the students of the Faculty of Mass Media Communication of the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, both full-time and part-time, of selected study groups of the first and second year of bachelor study in the field of mass media communication in the summer term of the academic year of 2019/20. Together, 176 students took part in the course being divided into 7 study groups. All students were asked to complete the final feedback questionnaire, as it had been distributed to all 176 students. The response rate was 98% with 172 responses returned.

The research sample of the **synchronous distance learning** part of the research (during the second wave the pandemic) consisted of the full-time students of the same faculty, of selected study groups of the first and second year of bachelor study in the field of mass media communication in the winter term of the academic year of 2020/21. Together, 149 students took part in the course being feedback divided into 6 study groups. All students were asked to complete the final questionnaire, as it had been distributed to all 149 students. The response rate was 93% with 138 responses returned.

It is important to add that the sample of the asynchronous distance learning research and the sample of the synchronous distance learning research were not consistent, as English as a foreign language is an obligatory part of the selected study programmes' curricula only for two years, thus the students completing the course in the summer term of 2019/2020 did not participate in the tuition of English in the winter term of 2020/2021. However, the sample participating in the synchronous distance learning research contained 42 respondents who experienced both forms of distance learning and some relevant findings related to these participants are drawn attention to later, in the Results and Discussion chapter.

4.4 Questionnaire Surveys

The questionnaire surveys were carried out at the end of both terms, i. e. the summer term of the academic year of 2019/20 and the winter term of 2020/21. They were used in order to obtain feedback from the research participants on distance learning carried out asynchronously via Edmodo during the first wave the pandemic, as well as on distance learning carried out synchronously via the videoconferencing tool of Google Meet and the educational platform of Edmodo during the second wave of COVID-19. The first questionnaire was distributed electronically through Edmodo and the data was being collected from 22nd May to 20th June 2020. The second questionnaire was also distributed electronically through Google Meet and its completion was part of the initial course lessons. The data was collected between 15th and 18th February 2021. To create the questionnaires, a sample questionnaire from *Social Media for Educators*²⁹ was used and adapted to our research's needs and objectives. Using closed question items in both questionnaires, we were able to find out about:

- how long the participants have been using Edmodo and the subjects with which they used it,
- technical equipment they used when participating in asynchronous and synchronous distance learning,

²⁹ JOOSTEN, T.: *Social Media for Educators*. San Francisco : Jossey-Bass, 2012, p. 101-104.

- their general perception of Edmodo and Google Meet in distance learning,
- the students' time management in relation to working with each lesson instruction and other study material,
- when they worked with delivered instruction and study material,
- the reason for posting/not posting their language production on Edmodo and participating/not participating in online lessons,
- the participants' perception of online testing conducted via Edmodo,
- the students' attitude towards limiting the communication within distance learning only to Edmodo,
- the students' attitude towards the communication opportunities provided by Google Meet,
- the students' perception of the language of instruction delivered in asynchronous and synchronous distance learning,
- the participants' evaluation of the communication with the teacher via Edmodo messaging and via the videoconferencing tool of Google Meet.

Both questionnaires also included open questions providing us with an insight into the participants' evaluation of the benefits and advantages and the weaknesses and disadvantages and of both Edmodo and Google Meet. We were also interested in how effective the respondents found the combination of the above-mentioned digital learning tools. Moreover, students were also asked to compare their experience with asynchronous distance learning with the synchronous one.

5. Results and Discussion

Despite the fact that **Edmodo**, as an educational social platform, has been operating for more than twelve years and, as a restricted-environment educational network in the education span from primary to secondary, has been ranking among top such networks, its utilization in Slovak education is rather limited, as the results of our research showed in both carried out surveys. As many as 94% of the participants of asynchronous distance learning (ADL) had never heard about Edmodo and had not used it before it had been introduced to them within their university English course. The figure was similar also for the participants of synchronous distance learning (SDL) with 96% of the responses. Within each study group participating in the research in ADL, the English course was the only subject using Edmodo as a tool of communication in distance learning with 99% of responses. The same figure applies also for the participants of SDL. Thus, English courses were the only courses utilising Edmodo as a communication platform. The reason for making student use Edmodo was the fact that within learning a foreign language, especially in conditions of distance learning, it is crucial for the students to be exposed to as much authentic language input as possible, and Edmodo allowed for such exposure, enabling students to access all the material at one place and at any time. On top of that, it served as a fast and convenient evaluation platform.

During the summer term of the academic year 2019/20, ADL of English language in the selected study groups was conducted via Edmodo. However, other subjects were taught via other platforms, mostly Google Meet, where students could see teachers lecture in real time. When asked about the **lack of real-time visual contact with the teacher**, 52% of the respondents agreed with the statement that they did not miss the visual contact with their teacher and that the written instruction and explanation of the subject-matter was enough for them. 41% of the research participants said they had missed visual contact with their teacher, but the written instruction and explanation had been enough for them. Only 7% of students stated they had missed visual contact with the teacher and that written instruction had not been sufficient.

In the winter term of 2020/21, SDL was conducted with Google Meet as the videoconferencing platform used and Edmodo served as a channel through which regular testing was carried out and all relevant study material was provided to students. 79% of the SDL participants stated that Edmodo was easy to use, it had a really user-friendly interface and they got used to it rather quickly. 20% of the respondents needed some time to get used to the platform but after that it became easy to use. Only 2% found Edmodo complicated and confusing.

As Edmodo was used within SDL only as a complementary tool and most of the actual real time online learning took place on **Google Meet**, we were interested in its perception by the students. The majority of them, 91%, found it an ideal videoconferencing tool for distance learning with a user-friendly interface and they got used to it quickly. 9% of the respondents stated that once they had got used to it, it was a good tool for online learning, but they still thought there were better videoconferencing tools to be used in distance learning.

As far as **size of study groups** and **type of lesson** are concerned, 68% of the respondents agreed that Google Meet is ideal for lectures even for big groups of students consisting of more than 30 participants. 32% of students found it an effective lecturing tool, but only for groups of less than 30 people. As far as practical and interactive lessons were concerned (including online language courses) 67% of the respondents thought that Google Meet can be effective for groups of 10 – 20 people. 20% think that it could be used for practical lessons even for groups of more than 20 people and 13% of the respondents would limit the size of study groups to 10 people when using Google Meet for interactive and practical lesson. It needs to be added at this place that students realize different needs of a practical language lesson, as far as the size of group is concerned, however, not all the students did always actively participate in SDL online lessons, hence expressed their satisfaction with rather big number of students in study groups.

Within the courses of English carried out by SDL, the platform of Google Meet provided enough space for **interactivity between the teacher and the students** according to 78% of the respondents. 21% of students stated that the platform provided some space for the above-mentioned type of interactivity and only 1 student (0,7%) thought that Google Meet provided very little space for the interactivity between the teacher and the students within the conducted distance learning course. When the level of **interactivity between the students themselves** was addressed, more than half of the respondents, 52%, stated that the platform provided enough space for them to interact together, while 36% of the students said that Google Meet provided some space for the interaction between students. According to 12% of students, the platform provided very little space for students to interact with one another. Similarly to the findings presented in the previous paragraph, the figures might have been affected by the level of students' will to actively participate in online lessons, as the following figures suggest.

As far as the **opportunities and space for students to actively participate in English lessons** carried out by the means of SDL are concerned, 38% of the respondents stated that the teacher provided them with enough space for active participation in the lesson and the students used these opportunities. Most respondents, 62%, felt that they had been provided enough space for their active participation in online lessons, however, only some of the students used the opportunity. However, it is interesting to observe that 81% of the participants who experienced both forms of distance learning withing their English course stated that even though they had been provided enough space for their active participation in online lessons, only some of the students used the opportunity, while only 19% of them agreed that students used the provided space sufficiently. The difference in active participation between these respondents and the ones who experienced SDL only might lead us to assume that once used to learning asynchronously, students are more prone to abstain from active participation in real time distance learning.

During SDL, in English courses we focused our attention on, the students were not required to switch on their **web cameras**. 86% of the respondents stated that switching on their web cameras would have been useless and ineffective, as the teacher used the screen to share a

lot of study material via Google Meet in real time (pdf files from textbooks, MS Word for taking notes, online grammar exercises, videos). 14% of the respondents felt that despite the amount of study material shared in real time via the videoconferencing tool of Google Meet, having to switch on their web cameras would have been useful and effective. If required to switch on their web cameras, 36% of students would have been „just ok with that,“ while 34% would have switched their web cameras on, even though they would have felt uncomfortable doing so. 17% of students would have not switched on their cameras as they would have felt uncomfortable doing so and 12% would not have used their web cameras as they did not have a working web camera. Only 2 students (1,4%) would have been really happy with having their web cameras switched on during their online English course.

As for **technical equipment** used within ADL, most respondents preferred smartphones with 39% of responses, followed by laptops with 35% of users. Desktops computers were used by 22% of the respondents. Tablets turned out to be the least popular technical equipment to be used when distance learning with Edmodo with only 4% of students. However, when the tuition was carried out synchronously, desktop computers became the most frequently used device with 46% of the responses, followed by laptops with 37%. The number of students using their smartphones in synchronous distance learning dropped significantly from 39% to only 15%, which is quite logical, as the screen and technical features of a smartphone cannot provide for such comfort of SDL as monitors of desktops computers or laptops. The use of tablets decreased, too with only 1,4% (2 respondents).

As far as the **time spent working with the delivered instruction and other study material** is concerned, we could observe that, in general, students needed less time to prepare for the lesson, i. e., to work with study material, when distance learning was conducted synchronously. The chart above presents the numbers of students, expressed in %, and the time needed for their lesson preparation.

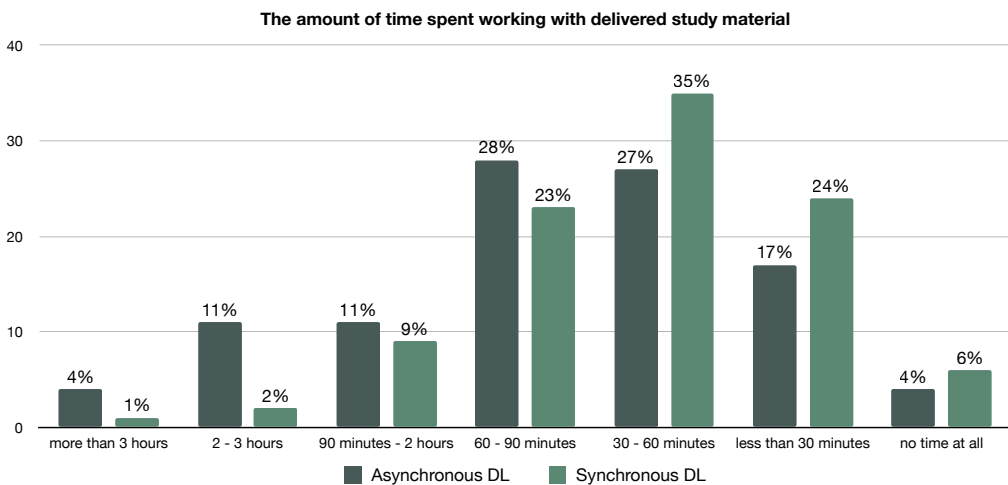


TABLE 1: *The amount of time spent working with delivered study material*

Source: own processing, 2021

When researching into the time spent working with the delivered instruction and other study material, it is interesting to observe that from among the respondents who participated in both forms of distance learning in both semesters, as many as 48% stated that they had needed only between 30 – 60 minutes to work with the study material, compared to 30% of the students who participated only in SDL and needed the same time. The figures differ also within the time category of 60 – 90 minutes, where only 10% of respondents participating in

both forms of distance learning stated they had needed that much time, compared to 28% of the respondents who only participated in SDL.³⁰

As distance learning in the courses that were in the focus of our research attention was conducted in both asynchronous and synchronous form, we were interested in **when the students devoted time to studying**. Even though the participants of ADL could decide for themselves when they wished to devote time to studying (whereas the participants of SDL were required to be present at online lessons at given times), it is interesting to observe that the figures do not show any significant differences, as seen in the chart below. This leads us to assume that the distribution of different types of learners, as far as their learning time-management is concerned, was very similar within both research samples.

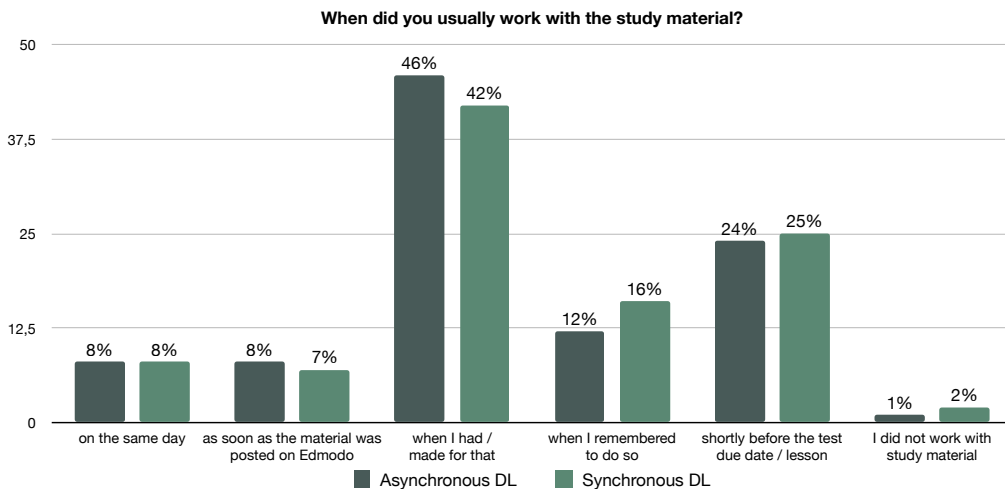


TABLE 2: *When did you usually work with the study material?*

Source: own processing, 2021

Dealing with individual study tasks included in the materials provided to students was supposed to help them prepare for **regular tests** carried out on weekly basis, either at the time students decided to take the tests in ADL or at precisely given time in SDL. These tests formed an integral part of each lesson of the course. Tests' creation (by the teacher), completion and correction were conducted within the online environment of Edmodo. Based on the results of the research, this form of testing was preferred over the pen and paper form in both forms of online learning with 79% of the ADL participants stating they would prefer online testing in the future, regardless of the form of the tuition, either face-to-face or distance learning. 21% of students would prefer writing tests on paper during the lessons. When replying to the same question, as many as 97% of the SDL participants chose online tests over the paper-based ones and only 3% would prefer the latter. In this context, it is important to state that online testing in SDL is an effective form of testing newly gained language knowledge. We conclude so on the basis of a previously conducted research that focused on the effectiveness of paper-based testing, asynchronous online testing and synchronous online testing carried out within three consecutive academic terms. The research showed that synchronous online testing is the most effective of the three forms of testing.³¹

³⁰ In this context, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that although the assumed achieved language level of both research samples was, according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, at least B1 – intermediate, the real language level of the research sample did not correlate with this requirement. In fact, the study groups the research was carried out with were *mixed ability groups*. This fact might explain the differences in time allocated to the completion of the instructed tasks by different students.

³¹ RIGO, F.: Effectiveness of Testing English Online in Distance Learning. In KVETANOVÁ, Z., BEZÁKOVÁ, Z., MADLEŇÁK, A. (eds.): *Marketing Identity: COVID-2.0: Conference Proceedings from the International Scientific Conference*. Trnava : Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, 2020, p. 547-557.

As far as preparation for the tests is concerned, the participants of both forms of distance learning were supposed to **work with** a variety of **study material** which always comprised of these three features: lesson instruction with clearly defined steps and written explanation of language phenomena dealt with (in ADL) or notes from each online lesson prepared during the tuition itself in real time by the teacher (in SDL), homework worksheet in the form of a Word document including a variety of exercises focusing at target language and an external link to a media content (most often a video) topically related to the lesson. We were interested in how students worked with these individual parts of study material. Within ADL, as many as 49% of the respondents worked with all material posted to them, compared to 37% of the SDL participants who did so. 28% of the ADL participants took the test after they had gone through the homework worksheet and watched the video, compared to 46% of the SDL participants who did so. The figures representing the students who worked with only one type of study material are almost the same for both types of distance learning with 1,7% of ADL participants and 1,4% of SDL participants who only worked with the homework worksheet and 12% of the ADL participants and 11% of the SDL participants who only worked with the video. 9% of the students in ADL did not work with the study material at all compared to 4% of the SDL students who took tests without any preparation. The figures imply that SDL engages students to working with study material more thoroughly. However, in case of lesson instruction for each lesson in ADL, this instruction was paid more attention to than lesson notes delivered to students within SDL as students participating in synchronous online lessons did not need to pay that much attention to them.

In our research, we were also interested in how students worked with study material, homework worksheets in particular, based on whether the **target language phenomena were new to them or not**. It turned out that as many as 62% of the ADL participants worked with grammar and vocabulary exercises even if the target language was not new to them. The same applied only to 48% of the SDL participants. On the other hand, 23% of the ADL participants did not pay attention to the exercises dealing with the phenomena that were not new to them, while only 15% of the SDL participants ignored such activities. 8% of students participating in ADL did not pay attention to exercises even if the dealt with language was new to them, while only 4% of students participating in SDL avoided such activities. Once again, the figures prove that SDL is a more effective method of learning a foreign language. Having participated in synchronous online lessons, students in SDL could decide for themselves which language phenomena require their further attention based on the explanation and practise opportunities provided to them in real time.

As far as students' active **written language production** is concerned, it turned out that the method of distance learning, synchronous or asynchronous, can affect such production to large extent. The written instruction regularly delivered to students each week within ADL prompted them to provide their language production (via which they would practise target language structures and vocabulary) and post it in the comment section below respective posts on Edmodo to obtain feedback from the teacher. Within SDL, the students were prompted to provide their language production in real time using the Google Meet's chat feature. When asked to post their sentences, within ADL, as many as 50% of the students did not post any sentences at all, reasoning there had been no need to do so as the topic dealt with was clear to them and they felt no need to obtain the teacher's feedback. Only 20% of the students participating in SDL abstained from providing their written language production reasoning they felt no need to do so. On the other hand, more than half of the SDL participants, 54%, did regularly post their written language production within online lessons using the Google Meet's chat feature expecting the teacher's feedback. Another reason for abstaining from the required activity was the fact that the students did not wish their peers to see their written language production, as was the case with 41% of the ADL participants, but only with 17% of the SDL participants. 9% of the SDL participants stated they had not posted any sentences as they did not wish

to actively participate in the lesson and preferred just to listen to it, which equals to 9% of the students participating in ADL who did not post any of their sentences on Edmodo as they had not done the activity and thus had created no sentences.

It needs to be added at this point that as many as 45% of the ADL participants stated they had not worked with lesson instruction at all. In SDL, this could not be the case as the lesson instruction was delivered to the students during online lessons and they had to work with it, i.e. pay attention to it, to be able to react to the teachers' questions in real time. As far as the **language of instruction** is concerned, within ADL, the instruction was provided in the written form and 60% of the respondents stated it had been clear. For 37% of students, the language of instruction was mostly clear and they struggled only sometimes, while 3% found the language of instruction complicated. On the other hand, the language of instruction within SDL, which was mostly provided orally in real time, was clear to 74% of the respondents, mostly clear to 25% and only 2 students (1,4%) found it complicated. As far as the explanation of grammar features is concerned, the synchronous distance learning proved to be a more effective method, as 82% of its participants agreed that the explanation was always clear, the given examples helped them understand new grammar, and the exercises carried out during the online lessons were sufficient. 18% of the respondents stated that the explanation was usually clear, the given examples helped them understand new grammar, but sometimes face-to-face oral explanation and practise in the classroom would be helpful. On the contrary, within ADL, the explanation was always clear and the given examples sufficient only for 46% of the participants, while 50% said that, even though the explanation was usually clear and the given examples helped them understand new grammar, sometimes face-to-face oral explanation and practise in the classroom would be helpful. 4% of the participants often had problems understanding new grammar based on the provided written explanation and they would have really needed face-to-face oral explanation and practise in the classroom.

Within both forms of distance learning, the asynchronous one in the summer term of 2019/20, and the synchronous one in the winter term of 2020/21, all students had a chance to contact the teacher using the **Edmodo's messaging feature** whenever they needed. 65% of the ADL participants did not use the messaging feature to contact the teacher because, as they stated, they did not need to do so, similarly to 67% of the SDL participants. 27% of students within ADL texted the teacher via Edmodo messaging and they saw it as a fast and effective way of communication. The same applies for 30% of the SDL participants. 5% of the ADL participants did not send a message to the teacher (even if they may have wished to contact him) because they did not feel comfortable with this way of communication, while only 0,7% of the SDL participants (1 student) did not feel comfortable with this way of communication with the teacher. Even though the figures might seem almost the same, it is important to realize that within ADL, Edmodo's messaging feature was the most frequent way of direct communication between individual students and the teacher, while in SDL students had a chance to direct any questions they needed to be answered to the teacher during regular online lessons on a weekly basis. Thus, we assume that SDL boost the intensity of communication between its participants. This assumption is supported also by the fact that the research participants who experienced both forms of the distance learning English course were far less active in using the Edmodo's messaging feature (83% did not use it) than the ones who participated only in SDL (59% did not use it).

The last closed question in the questionnaire carried out within SDL focused on students' evaluation of using Google Meet in combination with Edmodo in synchronous distant learning of English as a foreign language. The vast majority of the respondents, 98%, agreed that it was an effective combination, with Google Meet allowing for real time communication and Edmodo making it easy to access study material and take tests. 2 students (1,4%), however, stated that they had been unable to create an Edmodo account, thus could not comment on its effectiveness in SDL. Only 1 student (0,7%) found this combination ineffective and would have preferred to receive study material via email or access it from the faculty's official digital archive.

The questionnaire surveys used in the research, focusing on both ADL and SDL, included also three open questions that allowed us for a more qualitative insight into students' perceptions of Edmodo and Google Meet and their features utilizable in distance learning. When asked to express themselves in their own words on the **platforms' benefits and advantages**, the ADL participants stated that Edmodo's biggest advantage in asynchronous distance learning lies in the fact that it allows its users to self-manage their time, that it is flexible, easy to use and that the communication within the network is fast. Other frequent responses included: working from the comfort of home, the convenience of online tests, being able to find all relevant information in one place, the availability of a mobile application, receiving notifications. Some students stated that Edmodo served them better in distance learning than Google Meet or Google Forms. The participants of SDL were asked to comment on the benefits and advantages of using the combination of the two platforms in synchronous distance learning of English. The answers most frequently pointed out the ease and simplicity of the use of the platforms, followed by stressing the fact that all study material could be easily accessible in one place. Other frequent answers laid stress on how well the use of the two platforms was balanced, on the fact that Google Meet allowed for real time communication, and on the ease of taking tests via Edmodo. Students also appreciated the possibility of taking the classes from the comfort of their homes and they also positively commented on the modernity, effectiveness and speed of communication based on the combination of the two platforms in synchronous distance learning.

As far as **Edmodo's weaknesses and disadvantages** in ADL are concerned, the survey participants pointed out some technical difficulties they had encountered during its use, lack of interaction, both between the students and the teacher and between students themselves. From among other stated disadvantages (none of them reached 5% of responses) we mention minimum space for practising speaking, short time for completion of online tests, or the lack of teacher control that might have led to cheating. However, almost 40% of respondents could not think of any weaknesses, i. e. they stated „none,“ „no,“ „I don't know,“ etc. When asked about the **disadvantages and weaknesses of using Google Meet in combination with Edmodo** in SDL, 66% of the respondents could not think of any and thus stated „none,“ „nothing,“ „I don't know.“ Other frequent answers pointed out the lack of social interaction and technical problems encountered during the online classes (slow internet, initial problems with the use of the platforms).

The final open question of the survey focusing on ADL invited the participants to reflect on **Edmodo's effectiveness** in the course conducted by ADL. More than half of the students, 67%, expressed their overall satisfaction with the platform and commented on its effectiveness using attributes such as „effective,“ „good,“ „great,“ „best possible,“ „satisfied.“ Other, less frequent comments mentioned the network's clarity, smartness, the advantage of having all relevant study material in one place. Objections towards Edmodo, expressed in the answers to this final question, match the disadvantages stated in the previous paragraph. Overall perception of the educational social network and its effectiveness is positive.

In the final open question of the survey focusing on SDL, the students were asked to describe in their own words the **effectiveness of their SDL English course** in the winter term of 2020/21 **in comparison with their previous online English course** during the first wave of COVID-19, either at FMK or at their previous schools. The most frequent answers evaluated the course as „very good, effective, well-handled and organised“ (35% of the responses). 23% of the respondents stated that learning English by the means of synchronous distance learning was better than learning asynchronously and 20% considered the course to be better than their previous English course (however, did not comment on whether that one was conducted synchronously or asynchronously). Other responses (on the scale from 5% to 10%) compared SDL to regular face-to-face learning, considering it either worse than (11%), better than (6%) or the same as (6%) face-to-face learning. 9% of the responses saw no difference between their previous course and the surveyed course and 10% of the respondents could not make such comparison as they had not participated in an online English course in the previous academic year.

As some of the participants of the survey have experienced both types of distance learning dealt with in this paper, we were interested in their perception of the English course conducted by two different forms of distance learning. More than half of these participants (57%) have stated in the last open question that SDL of English was better and more effective than doing so asynchronously. However, almost one quarter of them (24%) found it challenging to get used to synchronous online learning of English once they had participated in an asynchronous distance learning English course, while nearly three quarters of them (74%) could not think of any disadvantages of using Google Meet in combination with Edmodo in asynchronous distance learning of English as a foreign language.

6. Conclusion

However thorough the presented research results are, the conclusions drawn on their basis are not to be applied generally. There are a number of variables that are to be taken into consideration with any teaching/learning process, such as the age and personality of learners, their learning styles, learner independency, size of study groups and, in case of language learning, language proficiency of group members and group homogeneity, to mention just a few. On top of that, in distance learning, other factors like available technical equipment, communication software, type of online lesson, its subject matter, regularity and length of virtual sessions, participants' previous experience with this type of learning, their self-discipline or attention span may all affect the effectiveness and outcomes of such learning. Last but not least, there is the preparedness and will of educators, not only educational institutions, but teachers in particular, to conduct and pursue this type of learning.

Both forms of distance learning dealt with in the paper have their benefits, however, as results of our survey has showed, synchronous distance learning proved to be more effective in learning a foreign language as it is more time efficient, it accommodates real time communication, provides immediate feedback, prompts learners to take a more active part in the learning process and boosts their language production, especially oral production, practice of which is crucial in language learning.

The biggest advantage of asynchronous distance learning lies in the fact that it enables learners, especially independent learners, to self-manage their learning time and, if combined with appropriate mobile applications, it can be available at all times allowing for reference to relevant study material. However, in foreign language learning its weaknesses are defined by the lack of real-time interaction and visual contact with either the teacher or peers and insufficient to none opportunities to practice oral production. It does not allow for an immediate feedback from the instructor and it faces the risk of learners' apathy.

There is a tacit agreement on the fact that education in the 21st century needs to functionally incorporate not only information and communication technology, but it should also effectively embrace media contents and social media, especially the ones serving educational purposes. Thus, using effectual tools of online learning as part or regular teaching/learning routines can serve all participant of education. The worldwide school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, that forced schools to switch from face-to-face learning to distance learning, placed all people engaged in education in to a hitherto unknown situation and might have changed the face of education forever. Distance learning relying on online learning has gained on importance and so has the necessity to have reliable tools to manage and master this type of learning, regardless of whether we are talking about face-to-face or distance learning. Google Meet and Edmodo can serve as such tools. One of the biggest strengths of combining them in distance learning lies in the fact that they provide a safe, convenient and user-friendly virtual space for real time communication within synchronous distance learning, in which a variety of media texts and learning materials can be addressed and practised using a variety of features provided

by Google Meet. Other relevant study and evaluation material can be posted immediately and subsequently stored and easily accessed later on Edmodo, hence enabling home study as part of synchronous distance learning, or it may serve as a solid base for asynchronous distance learning.

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