

# Special Aspects of Transfer to Distance Learning at the Stage of Pre-university Training for Foreign Students

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**Abstract**—The article deals with special aspects of transfer from full-time (class) to distance learning during pandemic COVID-19 self-isolation period in 2020. Opinions of researchers, material developers and teachers about advantages and disadvantages of distance learning are given in the paper. Social survey was carried out, where foreign students of pre-Master degree level and pre-PhD level training of preparatory faculty for foreign students of Kazan (Volga region) Federal University were questioned. Points of view of surveyed foreign students about advantages and disadvantages of distance learning were analyzed basing on the results of the survey. The survey highlighted the questions connected with educational process, problems of technical support and also emotional state of the students. Analysis of the students' opinions allowed to set teachers several serious problems to solve: choice of educational on-line platform, explanation of theoretical material in accessible form for foreign students, development of educational material for independent studies.

**Keywords**—distance learning, on-line study, foreign students, pre-university training, pre-Master degree training, pre-PhD training

## I. INTRODUCTION

Upgrade of all fields of learning activity takes place during the last decades. It is caused by reforms that occur in the system of education. The importance of usage of innovative technologies, development of different teaching materials is more and more discussed. Last events have shown that changes can affect not only methods and principles of

teaching, but also forms of learning. In this case distance learning is taken in consideration.

Dictionary articles that explain the term “distance learning” have been analyzed. It can be stated that the common sense of all its definitions is “studying in distance”. However, in our opinion, fuller definition is given in “New dictionary of methodic terms and definitions”: Distance education is the form to receive education where traditional and specific methods, means and forms of learning based on computer and telecommunication technologies are used during educational process [1].

Researches, materials developers and teachers inquire the usage of the distant form of learning. There are several works devoted to the inquiry of distance learning and to the inquiry of learning of Russian as a foreign language, learning of comprehensive disciplines in distant format. These works inform about the history of usage of distance learning [2, 3], reveal positive and negative aspects of this form of learning [4 – 7], research quality control methods of learning activity that is held in the system of distance learning [6, 9]. Authors of the work «Pandemic-Induced Constraints on Rapid Transformation to Digital Education» highlight the problems of distance learning that educational institutions all over the world have to use not by choice but necessity due to pandemic situation [10]. Some articles represent practical aspects and show experience of developed distant courses [10 – 12].

It is important to mark that majority of authors of these works express the opinion that it is important to have real communication in class with the teacher and group mates for

foreign students while learning Russian. Distance learning can only complement main study process and can be used, for example, during tests and independent study [4, 5, 16, 17].

Teachers that used distant form of learning mark following aspects of this form:

- Effective usage of multi-media technologies, since distance learning gives the opportunity to combine in one complex audio-, video-, text and graphic material. Thus, increase the degree of influence on the student and on the level of adoption of the material [18];
- Opportunity to study without long breaks [18];
- Flexibility (students do not attend regular classes, can study as much as needed for them to get knowledge) [5];
- Parallel alignment (learning can be held in combination with main professional activity) [5];
- Action at distance [5];
- Asynchrony (during the process of learning the teacher and the student can implement study technology according to convenient for each of them schedule) [5];
- Opportunity to collect learning material, save it securely [12].

One more positive moment can be added to this list: possibility to re-view the lesson and return to studied material.

There are a lot of disadvantages in distance learning:

- Time expenditures to prepare qualitative distant course of study discipline;
- Material and technical support, infrastructure of educational process;
- Problems that arise while checking such oral activities as speaking and writing (speaking about language courses);
- Lack of self-management of the student.

It goes without saying, during learning Russian as a foreign language and comprehensive disciplines foreign students need linguistic environment and “live” communication.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Social survey was carried out to find out opinions of foreign students about advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. 115 foreign students of pre-Master degree level and pre-PhD level training of preparatory faculty for foreign students of Kazan (Volga region) Federal University that had studied in 2019/2020 were questioned.

The age of students was in the range of 22 – 36 years. The proportion of men and women was 60 % to 40 % duly. The students identified themselves as citizens of the following countries: People’s Republic of China, Columbia, Egypt, Ecuador, Afghanistan, Syria, Mali, Czech Republic, Bosnia

and Herzegovina, Cuba, Cote D’Ivuar, Iraq, Venezuela, Bangladesh, and Guinea. Statistics data is given in percentage.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Currently foreign students are anxious about transfer to distance learning: it is proved by ambiguousness of answers to the question “Do you like the process of distance learning?” (fig. 1 a). When evaluating attitude of students of pre-Master degree program and pre-PhD program towards distance learning the majority of respondents expressed confident satisfaction with the process of distance learning (35,3 %). Only 17.6 % of surveyed didn’t like the process of learning in such form. Meanwhile quite a lot of respondents were not confident in their answers: “more likely yes than no” answered 20.6 % of students, «more likely no than yes» – 11.8 %, undecided – 14.7 %.

Still more than half of the respondents (58.8 %) agreed with the fact that as a result of transfer to distance learning it became more difficult to study in comparison to auditorium classes, for 23.5 % of respondents nothing changed and only 17.6 % answered that in such format it was easier for them to study (fig. 1 b).

Students of pre-Master degree level and pre-PhD level training marked following difficulties in distance learning: problems with comprehension of new theoretical information (41.7 %), problems with performance of tasks without detailed explanation by the teacher (44.4 %), increased amount of homework (22.2 %); 13.9 % of respondents underscored limited amount of theoretical material given by the teacher (fig. 1 C). This answer analysis helps teachers to understand that organization of independent studies and electronic study-methodic resources for foreign students in conditions of transfer to format of distance learning should be improved. Nearly half of the surveyed marked that great amount of time is spent in front of mobile gadgets or computers (47.2 %) (fig. 1 C). It, undoubtedly, leads to increased fatigability and long period of recovery. As a result, it can affect decrease of motivation to study. Nearly equal results of (44.4 % and 41.7 %) showed disadvantages of social interaction, which were marked in positions of “lack of “live” communication with the teacher” and “lack of “live” communication with group mates” duly. Only 6 % of students were totally ready for transfer to distant format and didn’t have any difficulties.

Students had technical problems that arose during study process in distant format. First place took absence of stable Internet connection and problems with mobile gadgets or with computers (75.7 %). It should be marked that not all students (16.2 %) and, according to students’ opinion, not all teachers (13.5 %) had enough computer competence in full amount to use informational-educational environment [19]. Only 24.3 % of respondents marked absence of any technical problems in the process of distance learning. In conditions of high-speed transfer to distance learning university offered corporate platform of Microsoft Teams. According to results of survey students with one voice found this platform quite simple and comprehensible to use in educational process.

It should be highlighted that majority of respondents (51.4 %) used mobile gadgets for distance learning, even

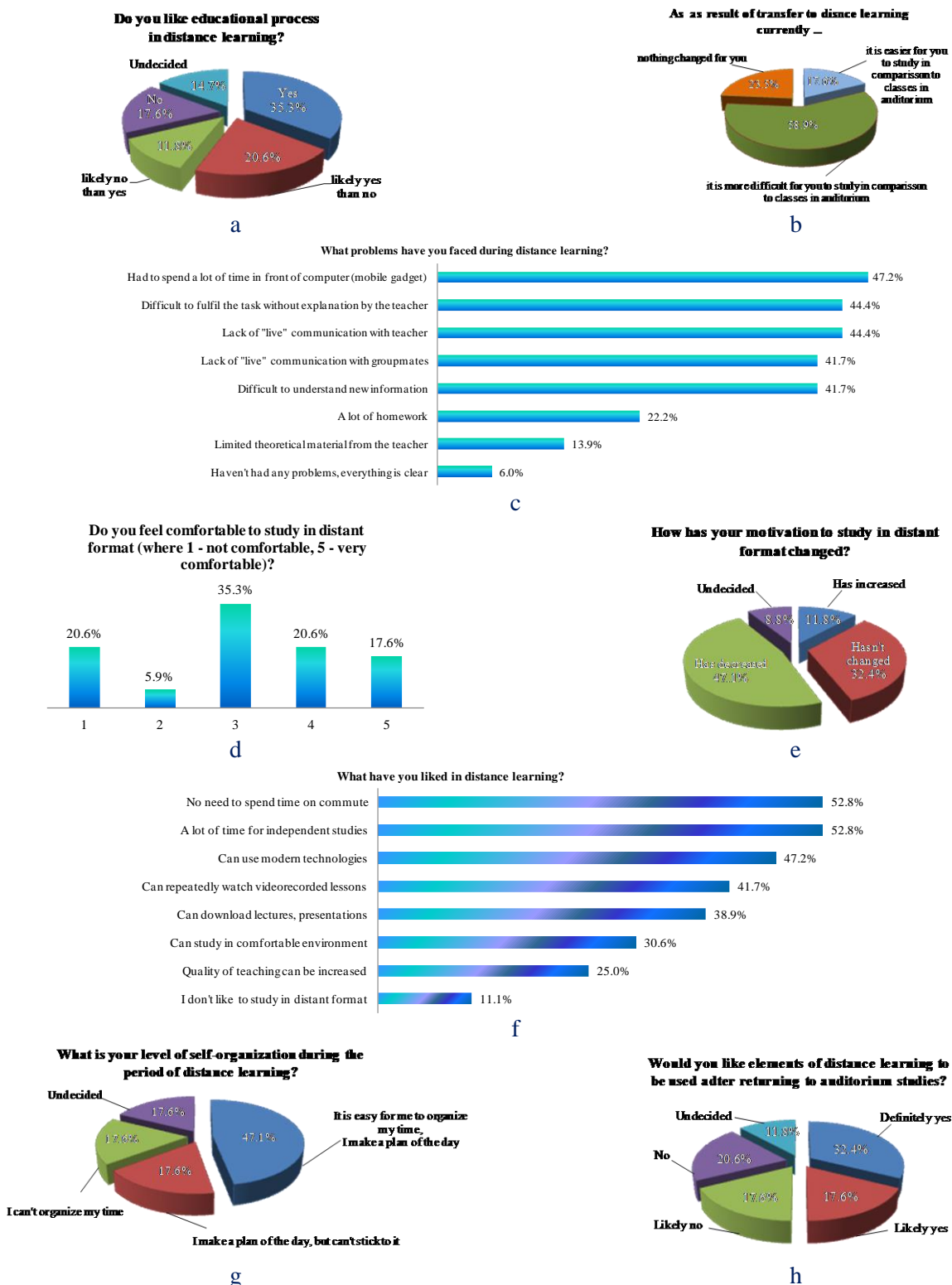


Fig. 1. Results of survey of foreign students of pre-master degree and pre-PhD programs training

though it was not convenient to watch the lectures, presentations and to fulfill tasks due to small size of screen diagonal in comparison to lap top or computer [20].

When answering the question about the comfort of learning in distant format considerable part of surveyed (35.3 %) gave averaged answer. Quite high result was shown according to answers of respondents (20.6 %) that did not feel

comfortable to study in such format. Meanwhile the considerable part of students (38.2 %) felt comfortable to study in distant format. However, high percentage of respondents (20.6%) had opposite opinion (fig. 1 d).

Students marked several advantages in distant format of learning. First of all, they highlighted the fact that they saved time and resources to commute to the place of study (52.8 %). As a result they got more time for independent studies (52.8 %) and possible increase of quality of learning (25 %). Surveyed also evaluated the possibility to use modern study technologies (47.2 %), playback of video-recorded class (41.7 %) and admission to download lectures, presentations, additional educational materials that help foreign students to satisfy individual demands in learning. Also respondents marked the importance of learning in comfortable environment (30.6 %) (fig. 1 f). There were students who did not like to study in distant format (11.1 %).

Quite comfortable conditions for distance learning that were created at preparatory faculty for foreign students of KFU were proved by results of mood evaluations of students during self-isolation period. Psychological stability and good adaptation of students to changed environment of learning was confirmed that 35.3 % of respondents didn't have mood decrease. And 32.4 % of students adapted well to changes. Increase in mood and faithful interest to get new knowledge in such format was shown. Meanwhile nearly one third of respondents (32.3 %) felt uncomfortable while studying in distant format: they lacked "live" communication with group mates and teachers; part of them (2.9 %) totally couldn't adapt to changes during transfer to distance learning.

Considerable part of respondents (47.1%) showed decrease of motivation level to studying in distant format, increase of this marker showed only 11.8% of students. Meanwhile 32.4% of students' motivation to study in conditions of distant format didn't change that correlated with the same level of adaptation to such form of education (fig. 1 e). When taking in consideration self-management majority of students (47.1 %) rather easily could organize their time during distance learning, could rationally plan their day and follow the plan successfully. Flexibility and parallel alignment were revealed as positive sides of distance learning. By 17.6 % of respondents not always could follow the plan of the day, could not organize their time and couldn't do everything (fig. 1 g).

The majority of surveyed marked the tendency of increase of study load during self-isolation period. Probably, it was connected with the necessity to spend most of the time in front of computer or mobile gadgets: as while understanding study material with the help of the teacher in distance classes (on-line classes, synchronized studies or during synchronic communication) and so during independent studies in the format of asynchronised studies (homework preparation, lab practices, tests). Part of respondents didn't mark significant increase of study load in distance learning in comparison to auditorium classes (35.3 %). Decrease of study load marked only 20.6 % of respondents.

Still considerable part of students (67.6 %) highly evaluated work of teachers of preparatory faculty for foreign students of KFU during total transfer to distance learning for

definite period. On the whole, foreign students understood study material and were interested in studying. 24.3 % of students not in full amount understood the material and evaluated work of teachers as satisfactory. Generally speaking, there was satisfaction with the study process at preparatory faculty for foreign students of KFU in the amount of 88.3%. The majority of students (88.2 %) plan to continue learning and obtain master degree and PhD at Kazan (Volga region) Federal University

Opinions of foreign students about further usage of elements of distance learning in educational process divided into the following proportions: 32.4% of students considered that such form should be definitely used, against – 20.6%, chose "likely yes" or "likely no" 35.2% of respondents (fig. 1 f).

From our point of view, distance learning can be accepted for foreign students, but not in full force and effect.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, not by force but by necessity quick transfer from traditional learning to distant learning has shown several advantages and disadvantages of this form of learning. Teachers have following tasks to fulfill:

- Choice of the platform to hold the classes in distant format so that it to a greater extent would satisfy all necessities of study process;
- Explanation of theoretical material in accessible form at initial stage of learning for foreign students;
- Development of the material for independent studies.

However it should be marked that during pandemic COVID – 19 distance learning turned out to be the only possible. It means that usage of this form will be continued in the future.

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