The effectiveness of online learning platforms in foreign language teaching

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Abstract

One way to teach foreign languages remotely is to exploit online learning platforms. The article investigates the effectiveness of online learning platforms in Foreign English language learning. The students from institutions of higher education were divided into two groups according to the online learning platform. The research finds that ATutor and Moodle platforms are effective in teaching English language remotely. The language competences have improved significantly. The study highlights the benefits of distance learning and advises universities on how to use that information to develop effective online learning programs that can later be implemented during crises. The study results can be used to organize the educational process with learning platforms.

Keywords: online platform; distance learning; English language; reading and listening; communicative competences;

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine forced the learning system to change drastically and move from face-to-face to distance mode (Aristeidou & Cross, 2021). The transition to distance learning encouraged teachers to use new online learning platforms to maximize students' learning opportunities. Students are motivated to investigate how to use online learning materials effectively, and online platforms became integrated into the language curriculum (Amin & Sundari, 2020). Online education became a challenge for both educators and students who moved to a new learning environment. The students' motivation decreased, and it had a negative impact on their academic performance (Firat & Bozkurt, 2020; Torun, 2020). The traditional classroom in high educational institutions suffers from inadequate learning resources and a lack of technological infrastructure (Bachiri & Sahli, 2020).

A sudden sprout of the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges in delivering successful foreign language lessons. Rapid advances in distance learning led to the emergence of new teaching modes and increased use of online learning platforms (Coman et al., 2020). Online webinars and innovative training programs should help reduce anxiety and encourage participants in the education process to use online learning platforms more (Collazos et al., 2021). Teaching grammar in isolation is not effective. Foreign language learning should include all aspects of language skills, such as speaking, writing, grammar and vocabulary, reading, and listening (Arvanitis, 2019; Erhan, 2021). On the other hand, modern technologies promote sociolinguistic competence, also known as the ability to use language in different social contexts (Sarimsakova, 2020).

One way to teach foreign languages remotely is to exploit online learning platforms. They use interactive technologies to support different learning activities and develop common language competences (Juárez-Díaz & Perales, 2021). These learning spaces have multiple advantages. Online learning platforms offer ready-made online lessons and assignments. Instructors can even design and create lessons and exercises themselves in accordance with the curriculum requirements and the language proficiency levels of their students (Hu et al., 2021). One can use them remotely. Online learning platforms offer space for content storage, enabling teachers to download textbooks and add all the necessary materials to the database. Thus, teachers develop lessons and adapt learning materials to specific teaching needs. The student progress monitoring feature helps teachers use student performance data to continually evaluate the effectiveness of their learning (Rukmi, 2021). The most popular platforms for distance learning are Moodle, Open edX, and NEO LMS. They make foreign language lessons available to students and more convenient for teachers than they can be in conventional face-to-face classrooms. These online learning platforms permit fast and easy access to language courses, the possibility of dividing the e-course into separate modules, training flexibility, and a knowledge-based assessment system (Liu et al., 2020). It is important to develop all language competences in the English language classroom because they help to develop proficiency and to facilitate learning. Communicative competence is considered the main one, followed by writing, lexical competence, reading, and listening (Cerna, 2018).

In foreign language lessons, the goal of the assignments is to develop all competences. Yet, it is difficult to achieve this in a distance learning environment (Borszéki, 2017). Online learning platforms with wide functionalities have become the most effective tools to organize the foreign language learning process and develop language skills (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced universities to consider online platforms and distance learning sites to improve teaching modes and store learning resources in a single database.

1.1. Related research

During the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign language learning inspires teachers to develop and implement new teaching modes into the learning environment (Gao & Zhang, 2020). The researchers from Indonesia underline that the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has not stopped the educational process. However, it created challenges for teachers to conduct classes and forced them to adapt teaching delivery methods, for which they may not have been trained (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). The experience of European countries suggests that distance learning did not influence greatly foreign language teaching but increased the use of different teaching methods and modes such as interactive technologies (Bell et al., 2017).

Modern technologies provide Russian and foreign educators with opportunities for using online learning platforms in foreign language teaching. The popular ones include Skype, Zoom, Google Meets, etc. These apps enable users to conduct online classes with video and audio elements. Therefore, these teaching tools are effective in developing communicative competence and practicing pronunciation (Ashrapova et al., 2020; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). Thus, mobile applications are also used in foreign language learning. For instance, one of the studies investigates the effectiveness of the Instagram mobile application in informal language learning. The findings suggest that learners expanded their vocabulary by learning new words and improved communication skills using Instagram (Gonulal, 2019). Moreover, there are some cases that show the effective use of Facebook and Twitter mobile applications. However, these applications improve communication between teachers and students only. The study conducted in Turkey explored the use of the Twitter application in teaching outside the curriculum. It was found that the proposed teaching approach increased motivation, helped to improve grammar skills, and expanded students' vocabulary (Taskiran et al., 2018).

Foreign language learning via online learning platforms makes it possible to apply different teaching modes in different contexts. For example, teachers on Zoom can divide students into groups and assign them different tasks. This feature helps teachers develop language competences and facilitate teamwork (González-Lloret, 2020). The assignment-based approach is popular among teachers because it helps them develop competence-based lesson plans (Baralt & Morcillo Gómez, 2017). The iDub method is an effective tool for teaching based on recordings of the student's voice in a semi-professional manner and, thus, analyzing pronunciation peculiarities (Talaván & Costal, 2017). Mobile applications encourage active participation in foreign language learning. For instance, the WhatsApp application has a positive impact on the students' ability to learn. The studies found that it improved interaction between students and teachers and vice versa, and helped to disseminate information between participants (Mbukusa, 2018). Moreover, WhatsApp can be used as an online learning platform for effective group work and the development of communication skills (Salem et al., 2018). The development of speaking skills was the most problematic area in distance learning. One of the main challenges was Internet access and the use of appropriate mobile devices (Cong-Lem, 2018). Foreign language learning has become important not only for those students who study courses in General Linguistics but also for Training in Technical Specialties. Different modes of distance learning make it possible to study at any convenient time and place (Dubskikh et al., 2019).

New teaching modes have been developed and introduced into practice to ensure uninterrupted learning. During the pandemic, learning language platforms become popular among teachers and students. One of them is MDA Framework − a popular foreign language platform based on video games. This learning platform integrates different learning assignments such as linking words and sentences, translation, matching words and images, sound and 3D objects interaction, video lessons,

and more (Harvey Arce & Cuadros Valdivia, 2020). Online and blended learning platforms are also used in foreign language learning (Ilknur, 2017).

The most popular online learning platforms are ATutor and Moodle. They have been successfully used as a component of the Flipped Classroom (a blended learning model in which online learning is used to deliver theory, and a classroom is used to improve language skills and engage students in group activities) (Jeong, 2017). In South African universities, these learning platforms created some challenges, and the teaching staff began to use WhatsApp as an addition to these online platforms. Therefore, it is possible to combine formal and informal learning modes (Mpungose, 2020). The online learning platforms have several advantages which include the possibility to develop online learning courses, easy-to-use interface, access to materials at any time, access to learning materials by different users, academic performance with grading rubrics, surveys, and online testing (Wammer, 2017).

The Self-Directed Digital Learning Material Development Platform (SDLMD) was developed for learning Turkish as a foreign language. The platform consists of learning modules such as puzzles, quizzes, flashcards, and digital posters. The learning platform helps teachers to develop multimedia materials and download the files (Karademir et al., 2021). Therefore, online learning platforms allow teachers to use ready-made learning materials and generate content for their educational courses. The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for blended learning is hosted on a Google platform, which functions similarly to an electronic library (Liang & Pang, 2019). It provides access to different language learning courses, which makes it possible to use the MOOC platform for distance learning purposes (Lim et al., 2018). It offers theoretical materials, practical assignments, and interactive technologies (Mellati & Khademi, 2020). Due to its interactive, communicative, and collaborative features, the MOOC platform allows teachers to develop language skills that go beyond the traditional classroom (Mısır et al., 2018). Open online courses help to develop foreign language competences in different contexts. Thus, they can be used either in blended or conventional learning (Zubkov, 2020).

1.2. Study purpose

The present article investigates the impact of online learning platforms on the effectiveness of foreign language teaching by looking at five language competences (communicative competence, writing, lexical competence, reading, and listening). Moreover, the research explores the possibility of shifting to online learning in a university and teaching languages in a virtual learning space. For this, the study evaluates the effect of a specially designed course for English-language students on their progress in language acquisition. The survey helped to analyze the level of students' learning competences upon the completion of the program.

2. Method and materials

2.1. Research model

The research is based on the comparative method. It helps to investigate the effectiveness of foreign language teaching via ATutor and Moodle platforms and analyze students' progress in developing English language competences. Students were assigned to a specially designed English language course delivered to them on two different online learning platforms. The proposed methodological approach makes it possible to analyze the effectiveness of different online learning platforms in distance learning.

2.2. Participants

The study was carried out at the Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University) and the

Kazan Federal University. The sample involved 660 first-year students training in the technical field; the average age of students was 17-18 years. The main sampling criteria were the same year of learning and the comparable level of English proficiency. Age and sex differences were not considered. Students who studied another foreign language did not participate in the research. Senior students were not included in a sample because they were more competent and could use the studied platforms earlier. All participants were divided into two equal groups. The goal of the study was to compare the effectiveness of two online learning platforms: ATutor and Moodle (Table 1).

Table 1. Tailored learning program for English-language students

Indicators	Moscow Aviation Institute		Kazan Federal University	
Number of students	330	50%	330	50%
Year	1	100%	1	100%
Age	17	35%	17	55%
	18	65%	18	45%
Technical specialty		100%		100%

2.3. Data collection tools

The research was carried out in three stages. The ***first step*** was to develop a tailored learning program for English-language students. The program was adjusted to the selected online learning platforms (see Figure 1).
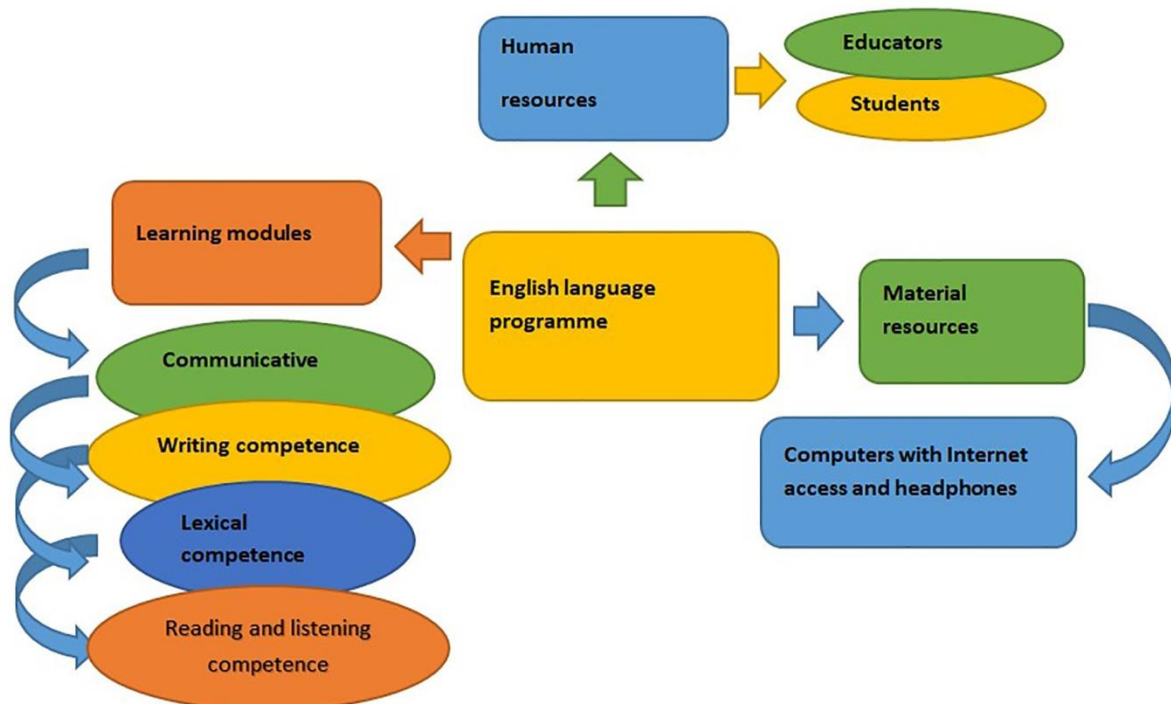

Figure 1. The breakdown structure of English language teaching via online learning platforms

It consists of ***four learning modules*** and allows the development of five English language competences (see Table 2). The learning modules for key competences were divided into separate sessions for each language competence. The online content integrated into the program includes e-books, articles, videos and audio recordings, links to online courses on other learning platforms, and other resources required to learn English. The program has one major requirement. Students and

teachers need a computer with Internet access to study online and headphones to watch videos and listen to audio recordings. The participating teachers familiarized themselves with the chosen online learning platforms and created their learning materials for students. The learning content includes different types of materials to instill different competences. The aim was to encourage students to move to a virtual learning space. Furthermore, teachers introduced students to different language learning platforms, including Coursera, EdX, and Khan Academy. These platforms offer online courses for English language learners. Students can complete written assignments in electronic form and upload them to the online platform from their accounts.

Table 2. Course content for teaching English via online learning platforms

Learning module	Goals	Resources used
Communicative competence	To teach students how and when to use utterances appropriately	Computer with Internet access and headphones
		A presentation on the learning opportunities that online learning platforms offer (developed by the teacher)
		Course: English language program: Improve Your English Communication Skills, launched on the Coursera platform (Coursera, 2021d)
		Textbook: English Communication (Ganguly, 2018)
Writing competence	To teach students how to use different writing styles	Computer with Internet access and headphones
		A presentation on the learning opportunities that online learning platforms offer (developed by the teacher)
		The English language program: Academic English: Writing (on the online learning platform) (Coursera, 2021a)
		Textbook: Business English Writing: Grammar, exercises, and vocabulary for business communication (Masterclass of International School, 2020)
		Course: English for Effective Business Writing, launched on the Coursera platform (Coursera, 2021c)
		Course: Write Professional Emails in English, launched on Coursera platform (Coursera, 2021f)
Lexical competence (grammar and vocabulary)	To teach students grammar and vocabulary	Computer with Internet access and headphones
		A presentation on the learning opportunities that online learning platforms offer (developed by the teacher)
		Textbook: English grammar in use (Murphy, 2019)

		Course: Advanced Grammar and Punctuation, launched on the Coursera platform (Coursera, 2021b)
		Textbook: An Introduction to English Lexicology: Words, Meaning and Vocabulary (Jackson & Amvela, 2021)
Reading and listening competence	To teach students reading and listening	Computer with Internet access and headphones
		A presentation on the learning opportunities that online learning platforms offer (developed by the teacher)
		Textbook: Practice Makes Perfect: Advanced English Reading and Comprehension (Engelhardt, 2013)
		Course: Increase Reading Comprehension with Actively Learn, launched on the Coursera platform (Coursera, 2021e)

2.4. Data collection process

The learning process took about one month and involved educators from the Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University) and the Kazan Federal University. The program was available to both teachers and students after registration. Students and teachers were invited to join the English language program by email. To view the program, teachers and students had to use their email addresses and an access code attached to their email.

The ***final stage*** of the research involved an interview designed to measure the effectiveness of the examined online learning platforms. The questionnaire was developed using Google Forms. Students were asked the following four questions:

(1) How would you rate the effectiveness of learning English via the online platform?

(2) Did learning via the online platform affect your English language?

(3) Did the online platform support the development of your language competences?

(4) What language competences did you develop while learning via the online platform?

No time limit was set. Data thus collected in both groups were then compared.

2.5. Data analysis

Statistica and Microsoft Excel were used for data analysis and comparison. The analyzed data were presented as diagrams to convey student responses by question. The diagrams visualize the effectiveness of teaching English on online learning platforms.

2.6. Research limitations

The major limitation is a small sample size. The experiment was conducted based on data obtained from the Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University) and Kazan Federal University only. The other limitation is that the sample does not include foreign universities.

2.7. Ethical issues

The experiment aligns with the ethical norms. The anonymity was maintained. The confidential information (such as name, surname, age, or place of residence, etc.) was not collected. All respondents signed a written agreement for data processing. The students were only asked to indicate their academic year and the online platform they used.

3. Results

Students' responses to the interview questions are depicted in Figures 2-5. As can be seen, more than half of the respondents in the first (56%) and second (61%) groups rated the effectiveness of learning via online platforms as high (Figure 2). Fewer respondents rated it as average (34 and 32%, respectively). Finally, 10% and 7% of students in these two groups considered it as low. Based on these responses, using online learning platforms in distance learning can be deemed effective. However, the second online platform appears to be better, even though the difference is not significant.
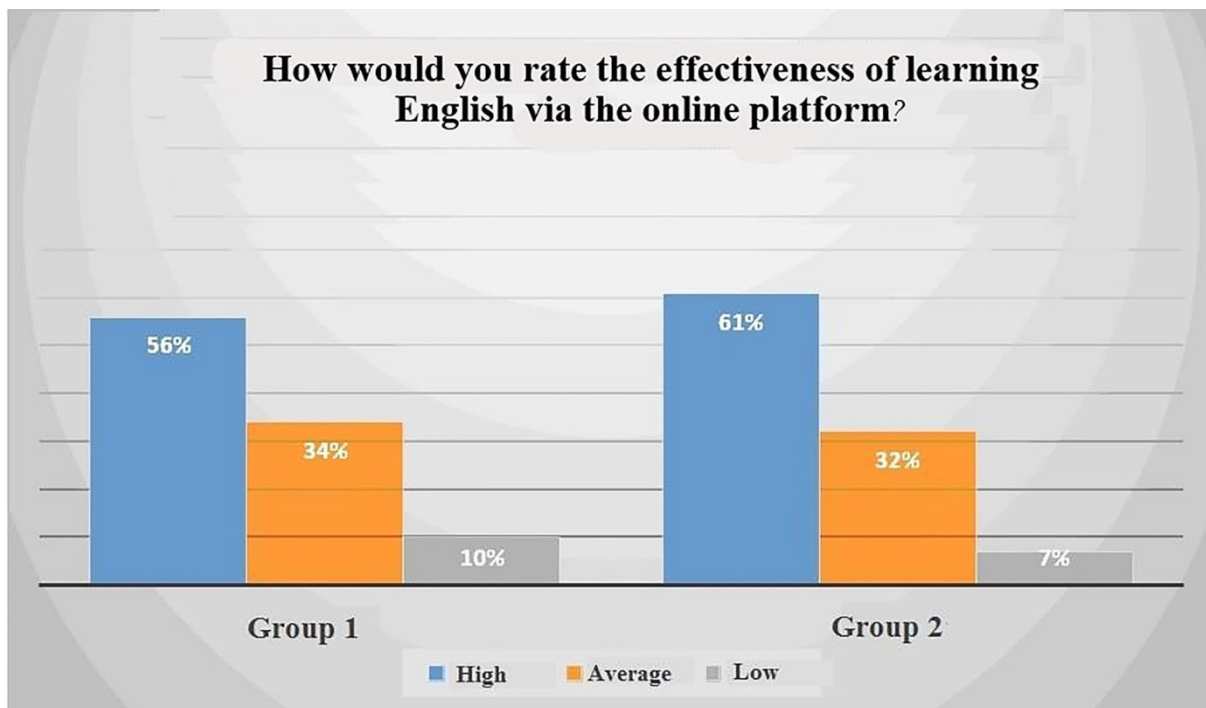

Figure 2. How would you rate the effectiveness of learning English via the online platform?

The students in the first (89%) and second (92%) groups indicated that online learning via Moodle and ATutor platforms was effective. Some respondents stated that learning online did not affect their language skills (11% and 8%, respectively) (see Figure 3). The results suggest that some of the students were not ready to study English on an online learning platform. The one group of students was apt to study English on the online learning platform more than the other one.
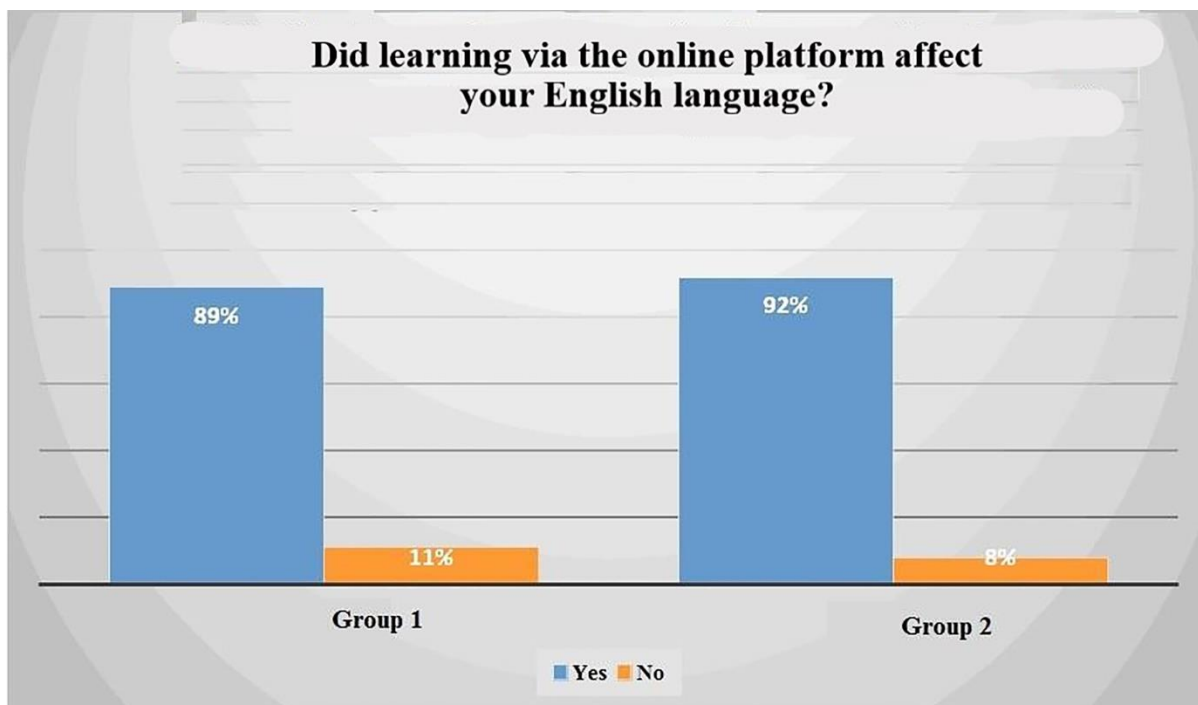
Figure 3. Did learning via the online platform affect your English language?

Most students in the first (91%) and the second (94%) groups agreed that online learning had a positive impact on their language competences (see Figure 4). Finally, 10% and 7% of respondents in these two groups admitted no impact of distance learning on their English language competences.
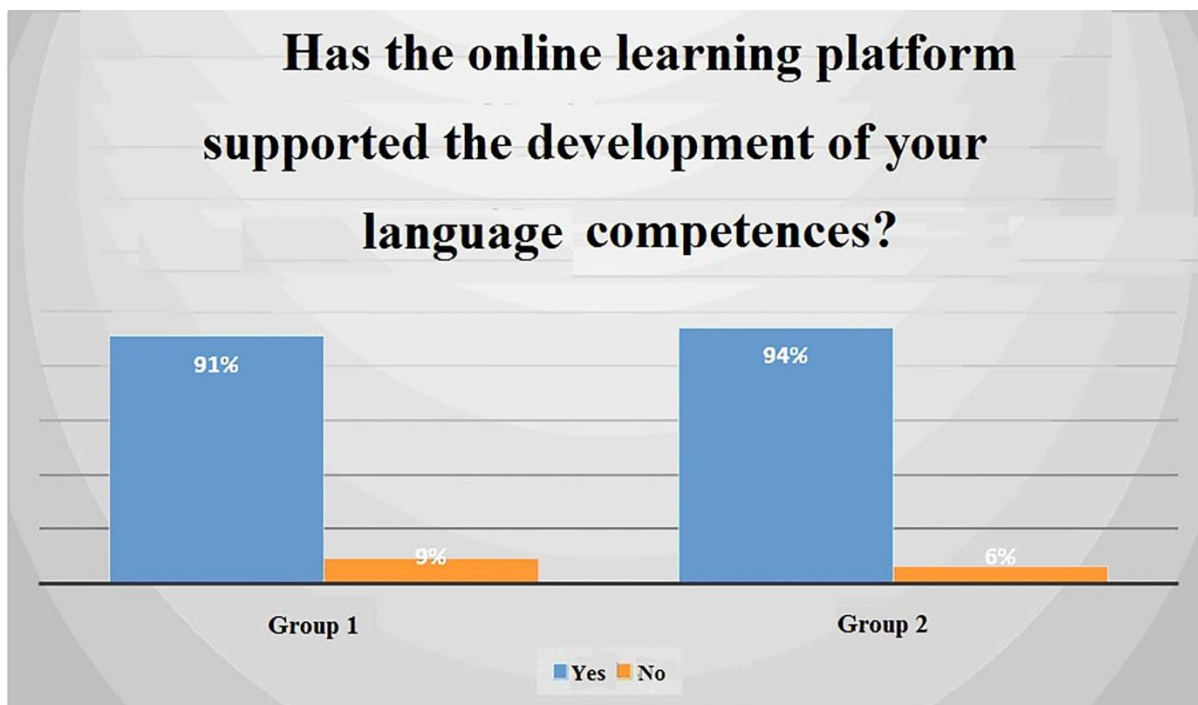

Figure 4. Has the online learning platform supported the development of your language competences?

The respondents in the first (71%) and the second (73%) groups indicated that the online learning platform had a positive impact on their communicative competence (Figure 5). However, other language competences were also developed. For instance, respondents in the first (48%) and the second (52%) group agreed that online learning had a positive impact on their writing skills. More than half of all respondents in both groups (57% and 66%, respectively) developed lexical competence. At the same time, both groups generally did not acquire reading and listening competence (34% and 42%, respectively).

Distance education occurs in a non-classroom setting and it is difficult for teachers to provide students with topics for discussions and oral **exercises**. It puts some limits on the development of reading and listening competence. Moreover, the second group results are higher for all competences than in the first one: communicative competence by 2%, writing competence by 4%, language competence by 9%, and reading and listening competence by 8%.
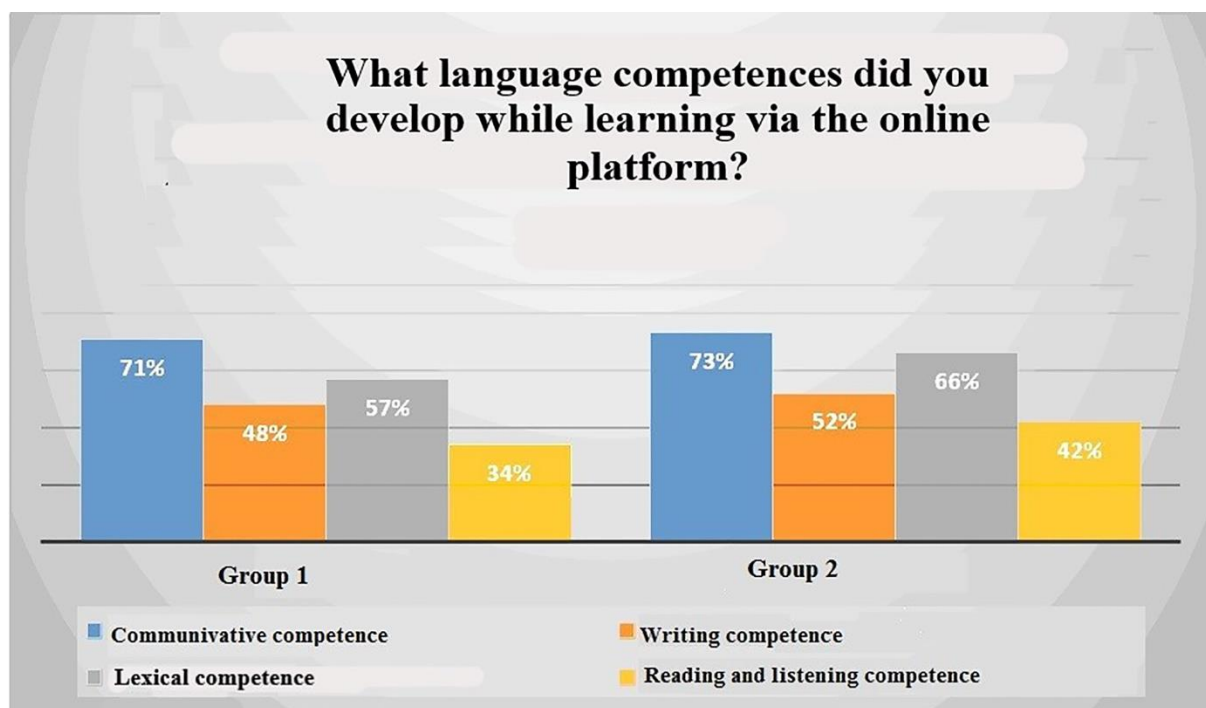

Figure 5. What language competences did you develop while learning via the online platform?

4. Discussion

The research results and experience of other countries show that online learning platforms are an effective tool in foreign language learning. Under the COVID-19 conditions, the use of modern technologies in online education has changed significantly. Researchers from different countries propose different distance learning approaches taking into account the effectiveness of the available language courses, program structure, and teaching methods.

The comparison of teaching methods and approaches used in Western and Eastern Chinese universities revealed that online learning platforms allowed teachers to upload different materials and assignments (texts, pictures, video, or audio recordings), communicate with students and support learning in conventional face-to-face and blended classes (Jiang et al., 2021). The use of online learning platforms as the main tool of distance learning in Spain and England proves the effectiveness

of online platforms for the development of communicative competences. Similar to the current research, Manegre and Sabiri (2020) and Pérez-Paredes et al. (2018) found that online learning platforms were the most effective tool for the development of communicative competences.

Open Sim and Sloodle online platforms propose a wide range of multimedia options to use theoretical materials, assignments, and exercises. Thus, they allow the development of a virtual educational environment using 3D functions. The main methodological approaches are CoI models with the Jigsaw technique (Pellas & Boumpa, 2017). Russia has no experience in using either the Open Sim, Sloodle or the CoI model combined with the Jigsaw teaching technique. There are many possibilities to introduce technologies in the learning process and familiarize both teachers and students with new approaches for using them in foreign language classrooms.

Distance learning can be successfully used to teach other foreign languages, such as Maltese (Żammit, 2020). The main difficulties, in this case, are the structure of assignments for communication. This problem arises because some students and teachers are not familiar with the programs and do not have the mobile applications required for effective video communication (Żammit, 2020). Therefore, the main difference between this and other studies is that it takes into account different learning spaces (programs, mobile applications, and online learning platforms). Consequently, there are differences in the results obtained. The current research found that online learning platforms are an effective tool in instilling all five competences under study. The competences should be properly developed to be effective. Therefore, it **can** be a challenge for many educators to create effective online courses (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021; Żammit, 2020).

The Iranian experience proves the effectiveness of virtual classrooms that are similar to online learning platforms. However, the differences are that online learning platforms developed exclusively for distance learning purposes provide users with more functionality and easier access to learning materials (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). Online learning platforms have become popular in Russian universities. Teachers and students prefer this method of education because it makes it easy to share content. Online classrooms, on the other hand, do not allow real-time video teaching (Kolyada, et al., 2021). Therefore, they can be used as one of the tools in distance learning to make online English classes more effective. These recommendations are necessary to promote the possibility of advancing and improving students' learning process.

5. Conclusions

The participants learnt according to the designed English language program on two different online learning platforms. The findings indicate substantial improvements in students' language competences, indicating the effectiveness of online learning platforms in English language teaching. In the first group (56%) and the second (61%) group students rated the effectiveness of learning via the Moodle and ATutor platforms as high. Fewer students rated it as average (34 and 32%, respectively). For 10% and 7% of respondents, online learning had not affected the English language skills. The research finds that 89% of students in the first and 92% in the second groups answered that online learning platforms had an impact on their level of language knowledge. Finally, 11% and 8% of respondents reported no changes in their English language knowledge. Thus, the vast majority of the respondents in the first (91%) and the second (94%) groups improved their foreign language competences significantly. Only 9% in the first and 6% in the second groups admitted no impact of online learning on their English language competences. Furthermore, respondents highly valued the enhanced communication and interaction facilitated by the use of learning platforms. The integration of traditional classroom and online learning provides natural situations in which listening, speaking,

reading, and writing are developed to enhance English learning. The implementation of online learning had a positive impact to improve students' communicative competences, as can be noted by the students' responses. Further research should be focused on investigating the possibility of using these and other online platforms to teach languages other than English.

6. Recommendations

The study found that the proposed English language program is effective and helps students develop their language competences. Therefore, there is a need for a more detailed study of the possibilities of integrating online learning platforms within the educational process. Modern technologies improve pedagogical activities and help educators to integrate the traditional classroom methods and distance learning.

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