

THE ATTITUDES AND EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS ENGAGED IN DISTANCE STUDY PROGRAMS IN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of distance learning study programs represents an innovation in a country's educational policy. In Serbia, distance education is still in its infancy. Although some higher education institutions have recognised its importance, few of them have included foreign languages in their distance study programs. This paper attempts to reply to the following questions: 1) Are foreign language teachers in Serbia technically and methodically trained for distance language teaching? 2) Are they satisfied with the achievements of their students who learn foreign language at a distance? 3) Do they support the introduction of new measures, and if so, which ones, in the aim of improving distance language learning? The conclusion drawn is that foreign language teachers in Serbia do not have sufficient knowledge and skills for the successful implementation of distance language study programs. Faculties in Serbia whose distance studies programs include foreign languages have a great responsibility in terms of the organisation of appropriate training for foreign language teachers. On the basis of the presented position, directions for improvements to current practice are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

There is wide agreement among practitioners in the field of distance language teaching that there are differences between teaching in a traditional classroom and at a distance, and that there is a need for new teaching approaches and teaching skills (Sun, 2011, pp. 428). Foreign language (L2) teachers who teach in distance learning environments for the first time face unfamiliar tasks and responsibilities. According to White (2003, pp. 68), there are three broad areas that are unfamiliar to them: (1) new forms of communication and interaction in distance environments, (2) the need for new kinds of awareness and skills, and (3) the scale of processes in distance language learning. In an attempt to provide a pedagogical framework for distance language teaching skills, Compton (2009, pp. 82, Figure 2) identifies three major skills areas: (1) technology in distance language teaching, (2) the pedagogy of distance language teaching, and (3) the evaluation of distance language teaching. Each of these areas is further broken down into three levels of expertise: novice, proficient and expert. Pedagogically, Compton asserts that a novice instructor must learn and possess knowledge of: (1) strategies for distance community building and socialising, (2) strategies to facilitate communicative competence and online interaction, (3) language learning theories for distance language learning, (4) curriculum design frameworks for distance language learning, and (5) strategies for distance language assessment. Bearing this in mind, training is an important aspect of learning how to teach distance language courses.

Even though it is enabled by the Law on Higher Education (*Zakon o visokom obrazovanju Republike Srbije*, 2012), a small number of faculties in Serbia implement distance study programs, and only some of them offer a foreign language. Evidence of teacher preparation for distance language teaching is difficult to find in the Serbian literature. This study, therefore, helps address this gap by exploring how L2 teachers in Serbia engaged in distance degree programs actually teach in this field and what their attitudes and experiences are. The research will offer answers to the following questions:

- (1) Are L2 teachers technically and methodically trained for work in the virtual environment?
- (2) Are they satisfied with the achievements of their distance language students?
- (3) Are they in favour of the introduction of new measures, and if so, which ones, in the aim of improving L2 distance teaching?

METHODS AND PROCEDURE

A survey of L2 university teachers engaged in distance study programs was carried out between June and December 2014. The research encompassed faculties from the University of Belgrade (the Faculty of Organisational Sciences), Singidunum University (the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, the Faculty of Business, and the Faculty of Informatics and Computing) and the Metropolitan University (the Faculty of Information Technology), whose distance studies programs are accredited by the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (*Vodič* 2014). A questionnaire was sent to these faculties via e-mail and 21 teachers responded. Hence, those teachers who showed an interest participated in this research (Table 1). The sample can be considered sufficiently representative considering the small number of L2 teachers engaged in distance study programs.

Table 1: The distribution of L2 teachers in different universities engaged in distance teaching

Which L2 do you teach?	Belgrade University		Singidunum University		Metropolitan University		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
English	1	4.75	6	28.7	2	9.5	9	42.9
Italian	0	0	4	19	0	0	4	19
French	1	4.75	2	9.5	0	0	3	14.3
Spanish	0	0	3	14.3	0	0	3	14.3
German	0	0	2	9.5	0	0	2	9.5
TOTAL	2	9.5	17	81	2	9.5	21	100

The data were gathered by means of a questionnaire which the author designed for the purposes of this research. The questionnaire consists of 16 questions divided into three parts: (1) questions which encompass basic information about the teachers as well as the training method for L2 distance teaching; (2) questions referring to the teachers' attitudes to certain aspects of L2 distance teaching; (3) questions related to proposals for the improvement of L2 distance teaching.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As presented in Table 1, the majority of the respondents are teachers of English (42.9%), followed by much smaller numbers of teachers of Italian (19%), French (14.3%), Spanish (14.3%) and German (9.5%). This data is not surprising considering the fact that following the adoption of the decision to introduce foreign languages as a subject, the majority of faculties in Serbia opted for English only, considering that as sufficient (Ignjačević, 2014). Singidunum University pays great attention to learning not only English, but also other foreign languages. They have the status of compulsory elective subjects, which means that the students of all three of the aforementioned faculties, regardless of whether they enrol in traditional or distance studies, in addition to the compulsory subject of English, also have to learn one more foreign language and they can choose between German, French, Italian or Spanish. That is the reason why the teachers from Singidunum University are the most represented in the research (81%).

The research showed that for their work in the virtual environment the majority of the teachers (90.5%) use the Moodle platform, while the remaining 9.5% use the Oracle platform (Table 2). This information confirms the fact that the majority of faculties in Serbia implement Moodle for distance study programs (Radić-Bojanić, 2012).

All of the respondents confirmed that they had been trained in the technical competences required for the use of the aforementioned platforms and that the institutions they work in had provided them with such training.

As regards methodical-didactical competences (Table 3), 57% of the teachers have been trained in the domain of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). This fact shows that more than half of the respondents are aware that the use of computers in our modern teaching practice is becoming increasingly present, as well as that teaching foreign languages in the virtual environment demands specific pedagogical and methodological knowledge and skills. It can also be seen from their answers that the teachers have gained additional knowledge and training through professional development seminars organised by cultural centres/institutes, professional conferences, scholarships (*Eteacher scholarship US Department of State*), and the biggest number cited the use of the professional literature (Table 4).

Table 2: The most used platforms

Which platform do you use?	Teachers	
	N	%
Moodle	19	90.5
Oracle	2	9.5
TOTAL	21	100

Table 3: The teachers' professional training in the CALL domain

Have you had professional training in CALL?	Teachers	
	N	%
Yes	12	57
No	9	43
TOTAL	21	100

Table 4: Types of professional training

How have you improved your knowledge in this field? The teachers' free answers	Teachers	
	N	%
Professional literature	7	58.3
Seminars organised by foreign cultural centres	6	50
Conferences	3	25
Seminars organised by the Institute for the Improvement of Education in Serbia	1	8.3
Scholarships	1	8.3

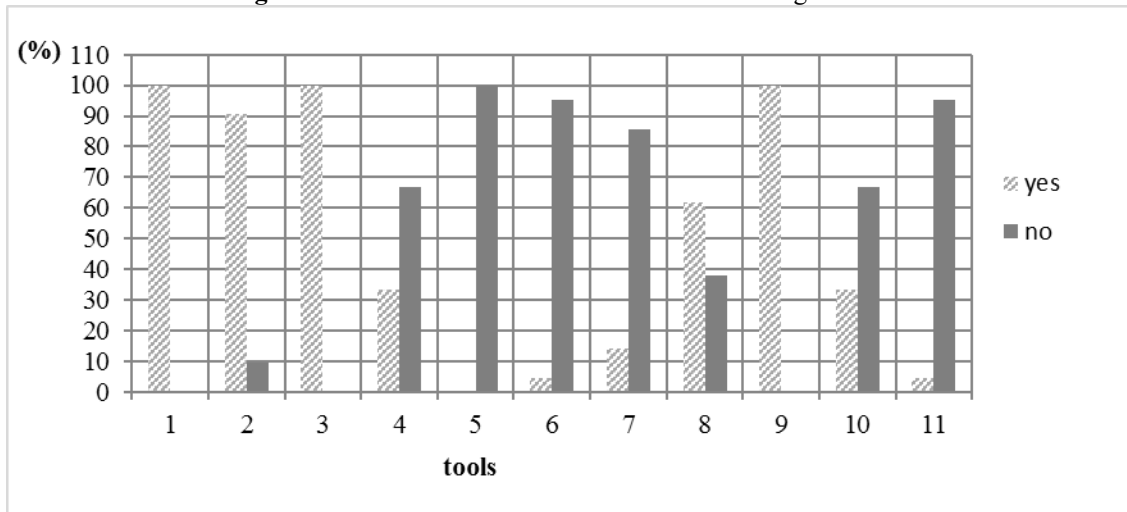
It is interesting that none of the respondents have undergone training in distance language teaching methodology, because such training was not provided. This shows that those faculties which implement distance study programs in Serbia neglect the importance of training L2 teachers in distance teaching methodology, guided by the logic that mastering the technical tools is sufficient. For the genuine improvement of distance L2 teaching, higher education institutions in Serbia need to organise professional seminars which will provide L2 teachers with the required knowledge and skills from this field of CALL.

The fact that 43% of the teachers (Table 3) have not undergone professional training in the CALL field could be interpreted with the assumption that this group of teachers were not interested in the implementation of computers in L2 teaching, i.e. by force of circumstances, they were assigned distance courses. It is also possible that such teachers have the desire to expand their knowledge, but are prevented from doing so because of their financial situation.

All of the teachers have participated in the creation of teaching materials for their subjects, and have done so mainly by using Word, PDF, PowerPoint and programs for designing e-tests (Figure 1). Just over half of the sample have used tools for designing dictionaries, and only one third have implemented forums and audio programs for recording and editing (for instance, Audacity). Very few teachers (14.3%) have also used wiki, and only one teacher has used a chat room or other similar tools (Skype), while blogs were completely neglected.

It is difficult to identify the reasons why some tools are used less than others. It may be assumed that the teachers are either not informed about their possibilities (43% did not have any kind of training) or have failed to implement the teaching techniques, ideas and activities which they learned at professional development seminars, or have not implemented them for objective (overburdening with teaching obligations in traditional studies and extracurricular activities, large numbers of students, lack of technical equipment, the non-applicability of seminars in practice) or subjective reasons (personal insecurity, resistance towards new technologies, discontent with their salaries).

Figure 1: The use of tools for the creation of teaching materials

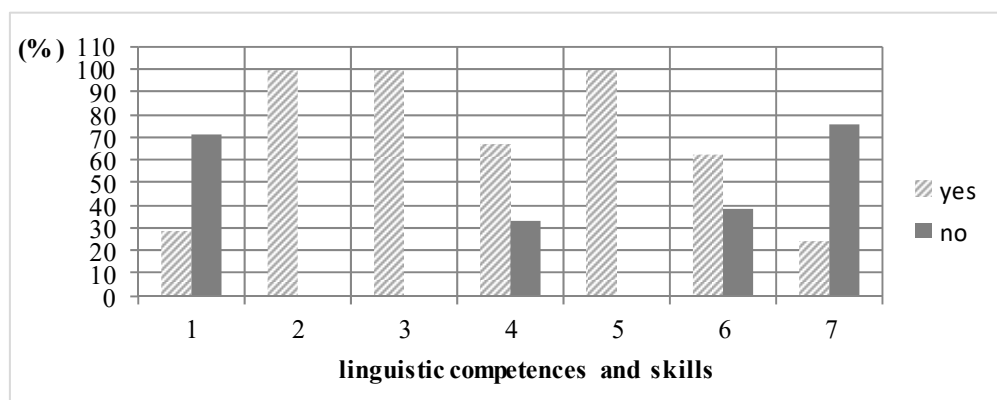


Note:

1. Word
2. PDF
3. PowerPoint
4. Forum
5. Blog
6. Chat room
7. Wiki
8. Tools for designing dictionaries
9. Programs for designing e-tests
10. Audio programs for recording and editing
11. Other tools

As regards language skills and linguistic competences, all of the teachers agreed that the online teaching material on the platform enables them to develop vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension skills, and more than half claim that such material also facilitates the development of listening skills (Figure 2). The majority of the teachers (71.5%) believe that pronunciation and speaking skills cannot be developed on the platform. These views may be linked to the teachers' responses to the previous question. Namely, only one teacher uses Skype and chat rooms (the tools needed for the achievement of synchronous oral and written communication), and one third use audio programs for recording and editing (the tools needed for the creation of pronunciation exercises or audio presentations). It seems that the teachers mostly use the content plus support model for distance language teaching. In this model, the course package is mostly print-based, with some audio and video material, and may be accessible either in hard-copy or on the web (White, 2003, pp 219). Occasional correspondence and online interaction are used as supplements to the textbook content.

Figure 2: The teachers' agreement on the possibility of the development of language skills and linguistic competences on the platform



Note:

1. Pronunciation
2. Vocabulary
3. Grammar
4. Listening
5. Reading
6. Writing
7. Speaking

Numerous empirical studies (Grgurović, Chapelle & Shelley, 2013; Levy & Stockwell, 2006) have shown that all language skills and fields can be developed through the use of computers. However, Levy and Stockwell (2006, pp. 190) warn that we should not be misled by claims that the implementation of some technologies (for instance Skype) will automatically lead to the desired results (e.g. the development of oral communication). Only carefully prepared materials (generated as the fruit of long experience) and knowledge of the advantages and limitations of the use of certain technologies can make distance L2 learning meaningful (Goertler & Winke, 2008, pp. 243). For that reason it is recommended that institutions for the compilation and testing of language teaching materials on platform engage experts (trained in the development of digital teaching content), because for many L2 teachers, who with very little or no experience take on distance teaching, the new roles which the virtual environment inevitably entail could present a source of frustration and discontent (Sánchez-Serrano, 2008, pp. 160).

Most of the teachers (81%) expressed satisfaction with the teaching content on the platform, 14.4% expressed total satisfaction and 66.6% were mostly satisfied (Table 5). The answer “yes and no” (19%) could be interpreted as referring to a group of teachers who do not have a clear position regarding this issue.

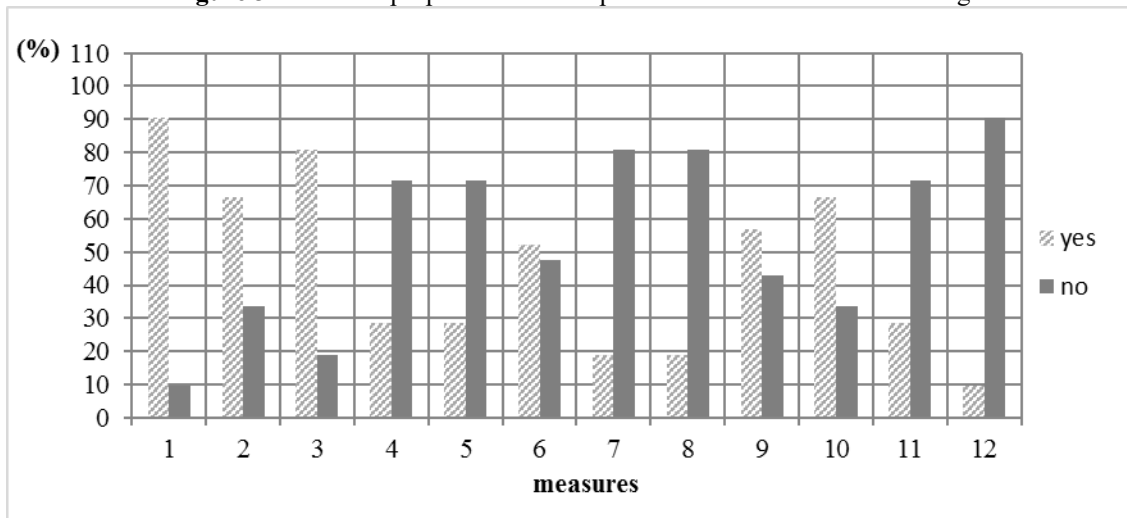
Table 5: The level of the teachers’ satisfaction with the teaching content on the platform

Level of satisfaction Are you satisfied?	Teachers	
	N	%
Not at all	0	0
Mostly not	0	0
Yes and no	4	19
Mostly yes	14	66.6
Fully	3	14.4
TOTAL	21	100

Although we could say that the results are favourable, the teachers’ satisfaction should be taken with a certain degree of caution. The teachers might have given protective answers. It is known that the researched faculties have only relatively recently introduced distance learning programs, and the teachers thus lack experience in designing online teaching content. Because of the absence of adequate training in distance language teaching methodology, the teachers probably did not recognise the problems which may arise in this type of teaching, and therefore could not be self-critical. Although distance education is both contemporary and significant, it is still an innovation in the Serbian education system, and there are almost no glottodidactic empirical research studies in this field in Serbia.

All the teachers believe that L2 distance teaching should be improved through the introduction of new measures. In their answers to the question concerning which measures should be proposed (Figure 3), almost all of them (90.5%) emphasised that professional development training organised through seminars at their faculties would be of particular importance for the quality of L2 distance teaching. Apart from that, 81% of the teachers believe that for successful L2 distance teaching it is important that part of the teaching is carried out in a traditional way, i.e. in the classroom. Also, two thirds of the teachers (66.5%) agree that in order to achieve higher quality teaching, more teachers should be engaged in designing the teaching materials on the platform and more frequent consultations with students should be organised. More than half of the teachers (57%) think that students who lack discipline in keeping up with the teaching content on the platform and the fulfilment of their obligations should be penalized. 52.3% of them would like better cooperation with those colleagues who provide technical support. Almost one third (28.5%) propose more frequent testing of students, the engagement of more e-teachers within one subject and the establishment of smaller student groups within the platform. 19% of the teacher support a change of the platform and a reduced curriculum. Only 9.5% proposed other measures, which were the introduction of audio and video conferences and some form of supervision, i.e. a professional team which would encourage, criticise and direct the teachers’ work.

Figure 3: Measures proposed for the improvement of L2 distance teaching



Note:

1. The organisation of professional development seminars/workshops in the institution where I work
2. Organising more frequent consultations with students
3. Combining traditional and virtual teaching concepts
4. More frequent testing of students
5. The establishment of smaller student groups
6. Better cooperation between teachers and technical support staff
7. Change the platform
8. A reduced curriculum
9. Penalizing students
10. The engagement of more teachers in the development of the teaching materials on the platform
11. The engagement of more e-teachers for one subject
12. Other measures

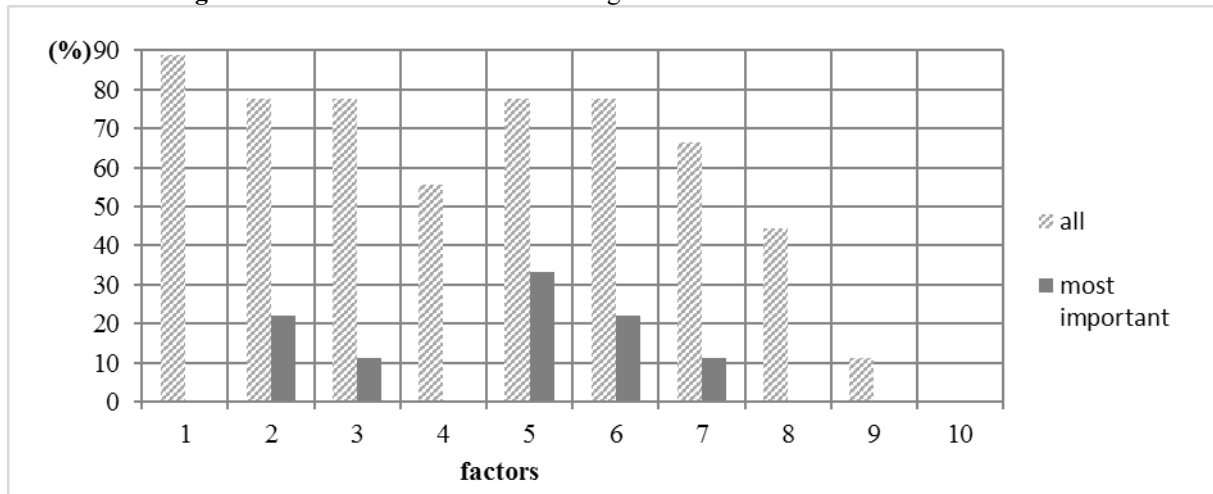
In response to the question as to whether work with students in the virtual environment motivates them, 43% of the teachers answered affirmatively and 57% negatively (Table 6). Both groups were tasked with selecting the motivational and de-motivational factors in the table, and with highlighting the most important factor.

Table 6: Teachers' motivation to work in the virtual environment

Does working in the virtual environment motivate you?	Teachers	
	N	%
Yes	9	43
No	12	57
TOTAL	21	100

Out of a total of 43% of motivated teachers, the majority (88.8%) like to experiment with new technologies (Figure 4). 77.7% of the teachers selected the following four factors: working with new technologies encourages personal creativity, enables the creation of interesting practice exercises of a traditional type, encourages students to work independently and provides detailed feedback information. Receiving positive comments from students motivates two thirds of the teachers (66.6%), and the possibility to create tasks which cannot be implemented in traditional teaching motivates every other teacher (55.5%). Praise from faculty management and their colleagues is significant for four teachers (44.4%) and additional payment for only one teacher (11.1%).

Figure 4: Motivational factors in working with students in the virtual environment



Note:

1. I like to experiment with new technologies
2. I can create more interesting practice exercises
3. I can create activities which encourage students to work independently
4. I can create tasks which I cannot implement in traditional teaching
5. Work with new technologies promotes my own creativity
6. I can provide detailed feedback information
7. I get positive comments from students
8. I am praised by the faculty management
9. I get additional payment for my work
10. Other factors

Most of the teachers (33.4%) appraised work with new technologies as the most significant factor because their implementation allows them to express their personal creativity in designing teaching content. The creation of interesting practice exercises and the possibility of providing each student with detailed feedback share second place (22.2% of the teachers selected those factors), while the creation of activities which encourage students to work independently and positive feedback from students rank third (11.1%). Some teachers justified their answers with the following comments:

“The use of new technologies encourages creativity and innovation not only in distance teaching, but in teaching in general.”

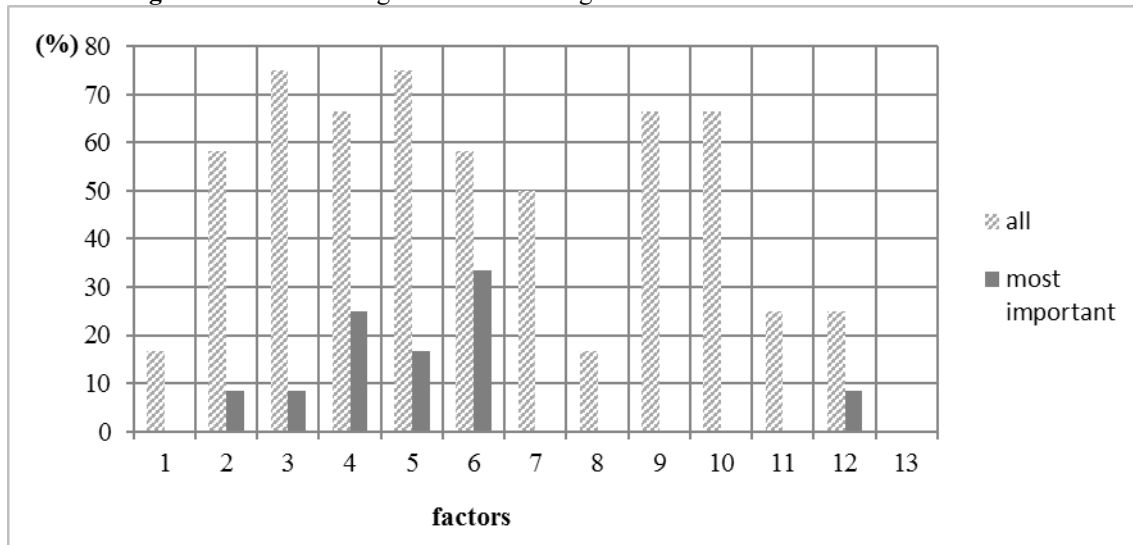
“New technologies are changing and improving from day to day. This gives teachers access to new, modern material. The development of new technologies increases the possibilities for teachers to develop and improve and make their teaching more contemporary.”

“It motivates students and provides teachers with detailed insight into their students’ knowledge.”

“With regular communication with students I can respond to their questions and dilemmas in detail, as well as carefully check and mark each task.”

Out of a total of 57% non motivated teachers, the majority of them (75%) believe that in the virtual environment students develop only some language skills and that there is an imbalance between the effort invested in designing the teaching content and the results (Figure 5).

Figure 5: De-motivating factors in working with students in the virtual environment



Note:

1. I feel insecure when working with new technologies
2. The creation of online content takes up too much time
3. There is an imbalance between the effort invested and the results
4. I achieve better results from traditional teaching
5. The students develop only some language skills
6. I cannot establish direct contact with my students
7. I cannot provide detailed feedback
8. I get negative comments from students
9. The students' lack of discipline
10. I feel overburdened with teaching and extra-curricular obligations
11. I am not praised by the faculty management
12. I don't receive additional payment for this work
13. Other factors

The questionnaire shows that two thirds of the teachers (66.6%) are not motivated because they believe that they achieve better effects through traditional teaching, are overburdened with teaching and other work obligations at their faculties and because the students are not disciplined in keeping up with the teaching content on the platform and the fulfilment of their obligations. The fact that the creation of online content takes up too much time as well as the difficulty of establishing direct contact with their students had a negative influence on 58.3% of these teachers. Half of them pointed out the impossibility of providing their students with detailed feedback, and 25% the lack of praise from faculty management and their colleagues, as well as the lack of additional payment. A feeling of insecurity when working with new technologies and receiving negative comments from students were aggravating factors for two teachers (16.6%).

The most important de-motivating factors were estimated in the following way: the impossibility of establishing direct contacts with students (33.4%), the impression that better effects are achieved through traditional teaching (25%), and the view that only some language skills can be developed in the virtual environment (16.7%). Each of the following factors was marked as the most significant by one teacher (8.3%): the creation of online content takes up too much time; the imbalance between the effort invested in the creation of teaching materials and the results; the lack of additional payment. The teachers justified their answers with comments:

“Since the teachers’ motivation in the classroom is primarily the feedback from students, I believe that greater and more frequent communication with students is essential. Such communication would make it much easier to learn those language skills which it is not possible to improve on the online platform.”

“The platform, e-mail and new technologies serve as help, but I believe that without contact and other methods they do not achieve significant results.”

“It would be desirable for teachers to be engaged in distance studies only, i.e. for the scope of their other engagements to be reduced, so that they can give their students more quality time, which would, by combining distance teaching and traditional approaches (the verbal aspect of learning), enable students to best master the curriculum.”

“Since I didn’t have any training, I invested a great deal of time at home and spent too much time preparing materials, and therefore I believe that any additional work should be paid.”

“Creating a document, transferring it to the appropriate format, placing it in the database, then on the platform, is a process which lasts longer than the preparation of certain units. The living word, feedback and the spontaneous development of speech are all very important in language teaching. It is through students’ reactions that you find out how interesting the class is for them, as well as the subject matter.”

“All my distance students come to classes, when they already have that possibility; sometimes the data from the platform just disappears.”

The teachers’ answers coincide with the claims presented by Sánchez-Serrano (2008, pp. 160), that L2 distance teaching involves a great deal of invested time, which is mostly spent on designing and evaluating activities, synchronic verbal and written communication and administrating online courses (because of the constant communication between teachers and each student separately). In addition to the aforementioned, L2 distance teaching faces one more serious problem. Namely, a teacher’s love for his subject and the enthusiasm which is reflected in his face or his movements and explanations is not so easily recognisable in the virtual environment (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, pp. 203). Consequently, 81% of the teachers advocate blended or hybrid learning, which would best overcome the aforementioned weaknesses.

In response to the question as to whether distance students know more or less than students who study in a traditional way, 62% of the teachers replied that they know less, 38% that there is no difference, and no teacher said that they know more (Table 7). The teachers probably reached their conclusions by comparing their students’ grades in tests.

Table 7: Teachers’ estimations of the knowledge of distance students compared with students enrolled in traditional studies

Do your distance learning students know more or less than students following traditional studies?	Teachers	
	N	%
Less	13	62
More	0	0
There’s no difference	8	38
TOTAL	21	100

Spanish teachers who follow the same program in virtual and traditional studies (Sánchez-Serrano, 2008, pp. 158) have a completely different impression. They all agreed that there is no difference in the knowledge of distance learning students and those who study in a traditional way. How much students will learn depends primarily on their willing to learn. The author’s dissertation, which considers two distance elementary German courses, the first to be offered at Singidunum University in Serbia, gave a more exact answer to this question (Đukić Mirzayantz, 2016). The purpose of the study was to determine whether there were significant differences in the achievements of the students in the distance courses (the experimental group) and those in the traditional courses (the control group). The conclusion is that a statistically significant difference was shown only for testing listening comprehension, where the students attending traditional courses achieved better results. For all the other subtests (reading comprehension, writing and speaking skills), both groups were statistically equal.

Table 8 shows that 38.1% of the teachers are mainly satisfied with the achievements of their distance learning students, 14.3% are mainly dissatisfied, and 47.6% are indecisive.

Table 8: Level of satisfaction with distance students’ achievements

Level of satisfaction Are you satisfied?	Teachers	
	N	%
Not at all	0	0
Mostly not	3	14.3
Yes and no	10	47.6
Mostly yes	8	38.1
Fully	0	0
TOTAL	21	100

The data that almost half of the interviewees do not have a clearly defined position regarding the presented claim can be explained by the assumption that the teachers are satisfied with their students' achievements if we take into consideration the context of distance studies, which in their case excludes or significantly reduces any chances of interaction. However, their grades in exams probably failed to meet the teachers' expectations. This is why it is important to encourage L2 teachers, who are included in distance studies, to carry out research in which they would study the achievements of their distance learning students, the level of their satisfaction with the course, their motivation, the time invested in learning, organisational factors as well as numerous other factors which influence students' achievements because, as Goertler and Winke stated (2008, pp. 254): „By knowing the success and failures of others who have already embarked on developing hybrid or distance learning courses, others can follow in their footsteps but avoid making some of the same mistakes”.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we investigated L2 teachers' attitudes and experiences with their distance language courses at faculties in Serbia and pointed out some potential improvements to the field. The data show that the surveyed L2 teachers entered the distance language teaching field without enough information. The training provided by the faculties to the participants was only technological, that is, related to how to use the tools on the platform. This could be the reason why more than half of the participants are not motivated for work in a distance setting. The most de-motivating issue for this group of teachers is that they are unable to develop all language skills on the platform and there is an imbalance between the effort invested in designing online teaching contents and their effects. The majority of the motivated teachers see advantages in the implementation of the platform in: the possibility to create more interesting practice exercises of a traditional type through the use of multimedia technologies, the possibility to create activities which encourage students to work independently, the opportunity for personal creativity in designing teaching content, the possibility to provide detailed feedback to each student individually.

In addition to recognising the significance of proper professional training, the majority of participants believe that distance learning should be replaced with blended learning, and that more teachers should participate in designing online teaching materials in cooperation with IT programmers. More than half of the teachers support the sanctioning of students who lack discipline in keeping up with the teaching content on the platform and the fulfilment of their obligations, which shows that this is a common phenomenon with this student population. Only two teachers suggested other, exceptionally useful measures – the introduction of audio and video conferences and some sort of supervision, i.e. an expert team which would encourage, criticize and direct the teachers' work.

The impression gained is that the quality of L2 distance teaching is not uniform, which proves that L2 distance learning in Serbia still represents an innovation and is in the testing phase. Such a situation leads to the conclusion that only timely planning and the adequate training of teachers will help us to avoid the numerous difficulties which accompany distance education. Issues such as course design, how the content is delivered, socialization, active participation, collaboration and evaluation must play a major role in distance L2 teacher training programs.

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