

## An interpretative phenomenological analysis of EFL learning motivation of first-year undergraduates

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** The COVID-19 pandemic (hereinafter referred to as the 'pandemic') caused many countries' educational systems to temporarily switch to online instruction, with no time to prepare teachers, students and learning materials. This study is aimed at tracing the changes in motivational behavior to study English as a foreign language (EFL) of ten first-year Russian undergraduates majoring in Physical Education and Sports (they experienced face-to-face learning which was abruptly changed into the online mode).

**Materials and Methods.** For this purpose, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews with the targeted (non-randomized) homogeneous sample of students was conducted. Using a bottom-up analysis, the codes were cataloged to identify some patterns.

**Results.** It was found that students were generally positive about online learning and their motivation to learn EFL remained positive. The following themes were revealed: 1. Positive feeling towards English course at university; 2. Having the image of their L2 selves with English as a means of obtaining important professional information; 3. Being motivated by group-mates and other students' progress in English language acquisition; 4. Feeling positive about the move to online instruction as more diverse authentic materials are available in the classroom; 5. Becoming more independent in learning.

**Conclusions.** The researchers conclude that while students were generally positive about distance learning, their EFL motivation was affected as the direct drivers had changed. After entering the university, students were motivated by direct factors of influence – their former classmates and their new groupmates' progress in learning English. After switching to online learning, these factors were substituted by understanding their own value as independent learners, since students had to be more active in finding and processing learning materials.

### For citation

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*The attitude to the English language as a means of getting professional information remained unchanged and stable. Linguistic competence is understood as an advantage in their future career, and not as a means of direct communication. A positive attitude towards online learning is based on its practical benefits (time saved on the way to university, more comfortable learning from home, etc.). Fears and insecurities associated with problems in teaching Physical Education online during the pandemic do not affect their attitude and motivation to study other academic subjects.*

### Keywords

*Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); EFL learning motivation; Motivational behavior; COVID-19 pandemic; Online learning; university first-year students; Physical Education and Sports.*

### Introduction

Due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic which started on a large scale in the spring of 2020 the majority of educational establishments all over the world faced the strongest necessity to contribute to the stop of the pandemic by temporarily closing face-to-face instruction in favor of the distant mode<sup>1</sup>. It inevitably became a challenge for most of them as even being somehow integrated into the process of distance learning in most countries educational managers and authorities were not prepared to make all the process distant.

Russia, as many other countries (O. V. Chyzykova 2021; L. Choi & S. Chung, 2021; E. Drugova et al., 2021; M. Lychuk et al., 2021 [1; 2; 3; 4]), witnessed the two periods of quarantine when teachers had to organize instruction using various online platforms without being given any time to adapt their learning materials. Generally Russian universities do not use distance learning in full (only for realizing some course in particular circumstances of an educational institution), so this dramatic change became quite an unexpected challenge for the system of higher education (N. Cowie, 2021; L. Efriana, 2021; S. N. Lee, C. Ogawa, 2021; L. R. Octaberlina, A. I. Muslimin, 2020;

M. N. Rahim, S. S. Chandran, 2021 [5; 6; 7; 8; 9]).

The researchers agree upon the principal barriers to use distant instruction, which are insufficient technical facilities, both at universities and students' accommodations; lack of instructors' ICT-skills and the absence of methodical and technical support (O. Babelyuk et al., 2021; O. E. Chernova et al., 2021 [10; 11]).

The research is focused on tracing the influence of these pandemic restrictions on students' motivation to learn EFL. In the strict sense the motivation of first-year university students, majoring in Physical Education who had the experience of face-to-face learning and distant learning of English during the pandemic was researched. As a matter of fact, foreign language is not regarded as a core subject for students, majoring in PE, and the results of such research would be informative for both understanding the general nature of their EFL motivation and the shifts in it provoked by the pandemic challenges. The research was based on using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (referred as IPA hereinafter) and L2 motivational self-system theory by Dörnyei (Z. Dörnyei, E. Ushioda, 2011 [12]). The research question *What was the influence of unexpected distance learning*

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO Covid-19 impact on education data. *COVID-19 education disruption and response, 2020, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural*

Organization, UNESCO. URL: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/covid-19-educational-disruption-and-response>

*introduction on PE University students' motivation to study EFL?* was addressed.

Regarding motivation as a complex of intrinsic (academic and professional) and extrinsic (having social nature) motifs<sup>2</sup>, it is necessary to state that the interdependence between the high level of students' motivation and foreign languages learning is a well-elaborated research issue (A. B. Setiyadi et al., 2019; A. H. Al-Hoorie, 2017; A. Mendoza, H. Phung, 2019; A. A. S. Alshahrani, 2016; Z. Dörnyei, K. Csizér, N. Németh, 2006 [13; 14; 15; 16; 17]). The relevance of this research is aimed at finding out how motivation is connected with the methods of presenting instruction (traditional face-to-face or online instruction) and with the usage of technology.

When contrasting online and traditional classroom EFL learning, researchers state that 63,9 % of students pointed to some problems in understanding the new material; while 45,1 % of them, on the contrary, emphasize the new opportunities to study languages online (I. Yu. Starchikova, 2021 [18]). University students mark the following advantages of online language learning as studying from home; wider range of ways to learn the new material and bettering their listening skills. As for disadvantages, they say about the absence of social contacts, of interaction with other students and instructors in order to exchange their ideas and experience. They also told about health risks because of the technologies affection (eyesight, posture) and about limited opportunities to speak foreign languages during the classes (because of the limited facilities of online platforms) (B. Klimova et al., 2021 [19]).

The experience of using different digital learning platforms and technologies to study

foreign languages is described in numerous research works from all over the world (L. Choi, S. Chung, 2021, E. Drugova et al., 2021; M. Lychuk et al., 2021; [2; 3; 4]). Generally, researchers give positive response to their application (flexibility to adapt to various educational needs; curricula; the opportunities to involve most of students to the educational process. At the same time researchers are interested in feedback issues and the ways to hold students accountable (O. V. Chyzykova, 2021; E. Drugova et al., 2021; M. Lychuk et al., 2021 [1; 3; 4]).

Such ICT as virtual game strategies (R. D. Pinto et al., 2021 [20]), web-quests (M. V. Rybakova, 2021 [21]) and visual content (T. I. Golubeva et al., 2021 [22]) in EFL learning are also rated rather high as they allow to make learning process more individualized, contribute to motivation by using authentic learning materials and activate individual students' work to find, select, process and take in necessary information.

Though all general aspects of EFL motivation seem to be deeply researched, there are just a few research materials dealing with how motivational sphere was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic in general and devoted to Physical Education students EFL motivation in particular. The two research works on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to EFL learning during the pandemic, which were published so far, state that intrinsic motifs (such as upgrading self-capacity and English performance) prevail over the extrinsic ones (of which the principal is positive opinion about people who speak English) (P. Subakthiasih et al., 2020; F. Suraya et al., 2021 [23; 24]). The research by F. Suraya, S. Rahayu, M. Mohamed, A. M. D. Mohamed,

<sup>2</sup> Bakshaeva N. A. *Psychology of students' motivation*. Moscow: Yurite Publishing, 2023, 170 p. (In Russian)  
URL: <https://urait.ru/bcode/513015>

M. Anggrahini is subjected on sports exchange students who participated in UNNES exchange program (it includes 11 universities from five countries – Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines) but it is worth saying that exchange students are initially more motivated to study English since they consider it to be a means of getting new knowledge (F. Suraya et al., 2021 [24]). The situation with the EFL motivation of university students, majoring in PE can be absolutely different as English is not a core subject for them at all. Besides, in the unexpected surroundings, created by the pandemic, the status of their major subject – Physical Education is described as the critical one. Being a very specific subject in the sense of its expressiveness, the need for physical presence, contact, collaborative learning and sports equipment, PE was severely marginalized and limited within this abrupt shift to online instruction (M. Kim, 2021; D. Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022 [25; 26]). It seems that this fact could influence students` motivation to study such supporting subjects as English.

In connection with the above, we set the goal of identifying the changes in motivational behavior to study English as a foreign language (EFL) of ten university first-year students from Russia (as they experienced face-to-face learning which was abruptly changed into the online mode).

## Methods

### *Research Design*

The choice was justified by the necessity of detailed understanding of the subject which is possible to obtain only from profound direct talking with people and listening to their impressions. IPA is used when settings (circumstances) have to be understood as well (which is primarily for our research) and for researching “timely topics” (Cresswell, 2013,

p. 68 [27]). In some IPA theories, the participants are called “experiential experts” [Noon, 2018, p. 75]. When talking about learning experience it is always explored from the people who experienced the phenomenon being under the study (face-to-face and online learning) since it is based on asking the two main questions:

1) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon (the shift from face-to-face to online learning)?

2) What situations have influenced (or affected) your experience of the phenomenon? (Cresswell, 2013, p. 81 [27]). The questions which were asked to the participants came from these two guidelines; therefore, researchers could then discover both general and unique themes from them (E. J. Noon, 2018 [28]).

### *Participants and data collection*

Ten first-year University students of Tyumen State University, Russia (4 women and 6 men, the average age of 17–18 years old), majoring in Physical Education, participated in this study. The sampling was caused by their being group-mates. The reason for the choice of these participants was their experience both in face-to-face and online training received. This allowed them to evaluate more accurately the quality of materials delivery and technology usage they had acquired. The first part of their English course was taken in the classroom (only two weeks) and the second part online, due to the COVID–19 quarantine.

The University`s institutional review board granted permission to conduct this study and all of the participants were previously informed and consented. Each of the participants was interviewed by the researchers via Microsoft Teams video-calls for about 25 minutes. The questions, that were asked during the interview, are given in the end of the article. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

later on. To support anonymity all the participants` names were coded.

### Data Analysis

The following steps were fulfilled to carry out the research: (1) multiple reading transcripts; (2) annotating and color-coding transcripts and (3) synthesizing for common themes. The participants were welcome to review their transcripts both to correct them if it is necessary and to provide the data accuracy. According to IPA theoreticians some idea is classified as a main theme if there are about eleven participants and at least five of them speak of it<sup>3</sup> (E. J. Noon, 2018 [28]). This proportion was the principal for this research. Further, if at least four of the participants told about the same thing, it was considered a sub-theme.

### Interview Questions

1. How can you describe your experience of learning English as a foreign language at the university?
2. How did you react when you were informed that your classes would move online?

3. What are the advantages of online classes for you?
4. Which disadvantages of online classes have you mentioned?
5. What are the advantages of traditional live classes for you?
6. What are the disadvantages of live classes for you?
7. Do you prefer online classes or live classes?
8. Which things became absolutely different after the switch to online learning?
9. Did your interest in studying English change in the semester online compared to the period of live classes?
10. How did you manage the new challenges when studying online?
11. What strategies did you find helpful in your online studies?
12. Was it easier or more difficult to do the tasks assigned in your language classes online?

### Results and discussion

The themes and sub-themes which emerged during the analysis are presented in *Table 1*

*Table 1*

### The themes and sub-themes which emerged during the analysis

<b>Theme 1</b>	Feeling positive to the university course of English
<b>Theme 2</b>	Having the image of their L2 selves
<b>Sub-theme 2a</b>	English is a means of important professional information
<b>Theme 3</b>	Feeling motivated by group-mates` and other students` progress in English
<b>Theme 4</b>	Feeling positive to the change to online instruction
<b>Sub-theme 4a</b>	Having more diverse authentic materials at classes
<b>Theme 5</b>	Becoming more independent in studies

<sup>3</sup> Arroll M. A. Health psychology and interpretative phenomenological analysis. In: M. J. Langweilder & P. W.

McCarthy (Eds.). *Methodologies for effectively assessing complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)*. London: Singing Dragon, 2015, pp. 43–51.

### ***Theme 1 Feeling positive to the University course of English (10 text extracts in total)***

When being asked about their experience of studying English at the university all ten participants described it as “informative”, “full of up-to-date professional information” and “helping in learning other subjects”.

*Participant 2: What I like is that now I feel more confident using English in chat-rooms and social media with foreigners.*

*Participant 4: I liked learning English both at school and here – at the university; I am good at it.*

*Participant 7: I was very surprised when it became clear that our university English classes were full of interesting contents about PE and sports.*

*Participant 10: I like it that our English course is based on the material which is directly connected with the major subject (Physical Education).*

It is obvious that interdisciplinary character of the English course helps not only to stimulate their cognitive interests but provides interest to the language itself. It corresponds to the results of the scientific research by Y. Zhurat, N. Davydyuc and M. Oliynyk, who came to the conclusion that modelling typical situations of professional and every day communication on different topics helps a lot (Y. Zhurat et al., 2019 [29]). X. Du, J. Jackson also proved that using English as a didactic means contribute to developing EFL learning motivation (X. Du, J. Jackson, 2018 [30]).

### ***Theme 2 Having the image of their L2 selves (9 text extracts in total)***

Nine participants gave some glimpses of their ideal L2 selves which seem to be connected with their professional career.

*Participant 2: I would try to take part in some international competitions (as a volunteer at least) and speaking English will be of great help.*

*Participant 5: The strongest motivation for me is to be able to speak English with my Internet friends and in the future I would like to meet them face to face in real life.*

*Participant 7: Most of my former classmates either speak good English or take some individual lessons of it, so I just do not want to lag behind.*

*Participant 9: I would like to travel a lot to different countries to study yoga practices.*

Using Dornyei and Ushioda (Z. Dörnyei, E. Ushioda, 2011 [12]) L2 motivational self-system theory it can be stated that these images of their ideal L2 selves will contribute to the formation of their L2 speaking selves. I. A. Kodzi, M. Oketch, M. W. Ngware, M. Mutisya and E. N. Nderu researched social contacts of teenagers as predictors of their academic progress in EFL learning (I. A. Kodzi et al., 2014 [31]).

### ***Sub-theme 2a English is a means of important professional information (4 text extracts in total)***

*Participant 3: English broadens my opportunities as a fitness trainer as I like to follow some celebrities` personal trainers on social media to have a look at their training sessions and workouts.*

*Participant 8: I think I will be using English in my future studies – to make my term and final university research works more informative using foreign sources.*

It should be mentioned that more participants regard the language as a mean of getting professional knowledge rather than using it in private life (travelling abroad, for instance).

It can be explained by the fact that they live in a remote region of Russia and mostly do not consider their chances to actively use English in everyday life as being high enough. This interconnection between socioeconomic status of a learner and his motivational behavior (the lower the status is the higher motivation learners demonstrate) is explored in the research by H. W. Shin and Y. So (H. W. Shin, Y. So, 2017 [32]).

***Theme 3 Feeling motivated by group-mates and other students progress in English (9 text extracts in total)***

Being surrounded by much more peers at the university than at school stimulates their desire to have the same skills (in foreign languages as well).

*Participant 2: I wanted to make friends with some girls in my group and they were very motivated at our English classes.*

*Participant 4: I made friends with some students majoring in English and was much impressed with their speaking skills.*

*Participant 5: The two of my group-mates were offered by our English language instructor to make some research work and I would like to do it as well.*

*Participant 6: At the very beginning I regarded myself as the least skilled student of the English class and just wanted to be like my group-mates.*

This peers` influence on EFL learning motivation is deeply researched in some works of Y. G. Butler and her coauthors (Y. G. Butler, V.-N. Le, 2019 [33]) who established that this influence becomes stronger in senior teenage period.

***Theme 4 Feeling positive to the change to online instruction (7 text extracts in total)***

The abrupt and unexpected change to online instruction by means of Microsoft Teams turned out to have a number of advantages for students.

*Participant 1: I always felt sleepy especially at the first class as I have to get up quite early, but now I have an extra hour of sleep.*

*Participant 5: I think it to be so modern and trendy to be able to get everything necessary for my studies staying in.*

*Participant 7: I felt homesick and since I had an opportunity to get back home after the quarantine was announced I felt very comfortable.*

*Participant 8: Now I do not have to do every home assignment late at night as I have more time in the morning.*

Feeling some comfort even in an absolutely new context seems to be positive for being motivated to study. The interdependence of positive emotions and EFL learning motivation was regarded and confirmed by the results of M. Papi and Y. Teimouri (M. Papi, Y. Teimouri, 2012 [34]). It is also worth mentioning that their fears and uncertainty about PE teaching during the pandemic (D. Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022 [26]) do not apparently influence on their attitude and motivation to study other subjects online.

***Sub-theme 4a Having more diverse authentic materials at classes (4 text extracts in total)***

Four participants mentioned that introducing online instruction via Teams made it possible for their instructor to use more videos with well-known sportsmen, trainers and fitness influencers.

*Participant 6: Our university classrooms not always have the proper Internet connection for us to use videos during the classes.*

*Participant 8: It was great to have virtual excursions to the best fitness clubs of the world and to listen to great trainers; with the assistance of my English language instructor I was able to understand their English speech.*

### **Theme 5 Becoming more independent in studies (7 text extracts in total)**

Most of participants declared improving their time-management skills and the absolutely new for them experience of searching for most necessary learning materials by themselves.

*Participant 3: I had always had a problem of procrastinating because at school I had teachers to control all the deadlines but now I had to manage everything by myself not to lag behind.*

*Participant 4: I am quite good at computers and I had a chance to show both to my groupmates and my instructor this superiority when it was necessary to find some interesting information.*

*Participant 6: I had experience of not only finding information for my English classes but also of processing (choosing the most suitable) materials written in the foreign language.*

This shift is even more important in the context of most instructors` being not ready with changing their traditional academic materials to use them in online practice (O. E. Chernova et al., 2021 [11]).

It must be stated that the results of this research cannot be generally extrapolated as the number of participants is small (the procedure of IPA was chosen exactly because the general character was not the subject of this research). Another limitation can come from the fact that all the participants are majoring in PE and English is not their core subject. It might be opposed that

such students are rarely intrinsically highly-motivated to learn languages. But the main goal of applying IPA in this context is describing these very students` learning experience in order to understand if their attitude to EFL had changed because of the online instruction during the pandemic.

As for the perspectives of further studies in the field, mention must be made that notwithstanding the thorough exploration of the EFL learning motivation, the new reality implies quite a lot of dramatic changes, concerning motivational behavior of students (depending on their major subject and how its instruction changed because of online mode); means of developing students` motivation to study languages online and their learning independence as well. Besides, technical facilities of online platforms and applications for learning foreign languages are to be discovered and analyzed yet.

### **Recommendations**

Teachers and university instructors remain the main “motivators” for their students even in this “new after-pandemic reality” which means that it is due to them to maintain students` interest to language learning (M.-A. Maican, E. Cocoradă, 2021 [35]) as many researchers (Y. Zhurat et al., 2019 L. K. Fryer, M. Ainley, 2019; [29; 36]) agree upon the interdependence between students` interest to the subject and their cognitive confidence and academic progress. Being in the situation of unexpected sudden changes, most of teachers did not have any experience of conducting online classes, using special learning platforms and converting their learning materials to be suitable for online teaching. Many researchers now are concentrated on their efforts to realize barriers, fears and challenges both teachers and students have survived (L. Choi, S. Chung, 2021; E. Drugova et al., 2021 [2; 3] for PE teachers` and students`



practices as well (M. Kim et al., 2021; D. Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022 [25; 26]). But the principal effort is how to take all the benefits online education can offer – whether for teachers (unlimited didactic and information facilities) or for students (becoming more independent and proactive) (M. Lychuk et al., 2021; O. Lazorak et al., 2021 [4; 37]).

### Conclusions

Thanks to applying IPA analysis, it became clear that.

1) Initially (after entering the university and having a few weeks of traditional face-to-face studies) students were primarily motivated both by their ex school class-mates and their progress in English and by their new closest social surrounding in the students` group. The influence of peers and competition formed their motivational behavior because these were the direct factors of influence. After the university had to introduce online studies, these factors of affection were changed by understanding their own value as independent learners as students were to be more proactive in searching and processing learning materials.

2) What remained unchanged and stable is considering English as a means of extracting professional information and linguistic competence as a benefit for their future career rather than a means of direct communication. Mention should be made here that the participants live in a remote region of Russia and lack the direct contacts with foreigners. Their English language practice is limited by social network friends from abroad so far.

3) Researching these definite students` learning experience during the pandemic, it was interesting to know that their generally positive attitude to online instruction was grounded on the fact of its practical comfort (saving time on the way to the university, feeling more comfortable because of studying from home etc.).

It is hoped that the results of this IPA research will be of use for the ones who deal with pandemic-related EFL motivational issues in their research work and for the specialists in PE and sports to better understand the shifts their students have to survive in their educational practice.

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## Интерпретативный феноменологический анализ мотивации изучения иностранного языка студентами-первокурсниками вуза

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**Проблема и цель.** Пандемия COVID-19 заставила образовательные системы многих стран временно перейти в онлайн-режим, к которому не были готовы ни учителя, ни учащиеся, а также не было подготовленных учебных и методических материалов. Цель исследования – выявить изменения в мотивационном поведении студентов при изучении ими английского языка как иностранного (EFL).

**Методология.** Исследование выполнено с опорой на интерпретативный феноменологический анализ (IPA): целенаправленная однородная выборка студентов отвечала на вопросы полуструктурированного интервью, на основе которых путем восходящего анализа и каталогизации кодов был выведен ряд паттернов (тем). В исследовании участвовали студенты-первокурсники профиля «физкультура и спорт» (они начали свое обучение в университете очно, но внезапно вынуждены были перейти на онлайн-режим).

**Результаты.** Авторы выявили, что в целом студенты имеют положительное отношение к обучению в режиме онлайн. Мотивация студентов к изучению иностранного языка осталась неизменно позитивной, при этом были выделены следующие общие для участников анализа темы: 1) позитивное отношение к университетскому курсу английского языка; 2) представление о себе как о субъекте, изучающем иностранный язык для того, чтобы использовать его как средство получения важной профессиональной информации; 3) мотивированность успехами одноклассников и успехами других студентов в изучении английского языка; 4) позитивное отношение к переходу на онлайн-обучение из-за возможности использовать на занятиях более разнообразные аутентичные материалы; 5) ощущение большей собственной независимости в учебной деятельности.

После поступления в университет студенты были мотивированы непосредственными факторами влияния – успехами своих бывших одноклассников и своим новым социальным окружением в студенческой группе. Переход на онлайн-обучение способствовал замещению этих

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факторов пониманием собственной ценности как независимых обучающихся, поскольку студенты должны были проявлять большую активность в поиске и обработке учебных материалов. Неизменным и стабильным осталось отношение к английскому языку как к средству извлечения профессиональной информации. Лингвистическая компетентность понимается студентами как преимущество в их будущей карьере, а не как средство прямого общения. Положительное отношение к онлайн-обучению основано на его практических преимуществах (экономия времени на дороге в университет, ощущение большего комфорта из-за учебы из дома и т. д.). Страхи и неуверенность, связанные с проблемами в преподавании физкультуры в режиме онлайн во время пандемии, не влияют на мотивацию к изучению других предметов.

**Заключение.** В результате проведенного анализа авторы констатировали положительное отношение студентов к обучению в дистанционном формате и изменение факторов влияния на мотивационное поведение при изучении иностранного языка в условиях трансформации режима обучения.

**Ключевые слова:** интерпретативный феноменологический анализ (IPA); мотивация изучения иностранного языка; мотивационное поведение; пандемия COVID-19; онлайн-обучение; студенты-первокурсники вуза; физическая культура.

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